



Peer-Reviewed Article

A Close Look at the Concept of *Authority* in Information Literacy

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *authority*—its definition and the consequences thereof—receives intense scrutiny in library scholarship. This article intervenes in that debate with attention to the larger political context in which the debate is taking place. The article’s purpose is threefold. First, it analyzes the most significant work on authority from philosophy and information studies in order to explicate the concept. Second, it draws on that explication to identify three components of authority that are under-addressed in library literature: a) the distinction between cognitive authority and political authority, b) the means by which authority is recognized or granted to a source, and c) the relationship between a source’s authority and the features (such as author, publisher, etc.) of that source. Finally, the article illustrates why each of those under-addressed components is important to speaking and teaching about information literacy effectively in the United States’ current political climate.

KEYWORDS

Cognitive authority, information literacy, pedagogy, political authority

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Introduction

In the past several years of library scholarship, the concept of *authority* has received intense attention and debate. This is likely due to two events that coincided in 2016. First, on January 11, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) formally adopted the *Framework for information literacy for higher education*, which replaced and thoroughly reimagined ACRL's 2000 *Information literacy competency standards for higher education*. Then, on November 8, Donald J. Trump was elected to the presidency of the United States.

For many media professionals and academics, Trump's election inaugurated a new, so-called "post-truth" era, one in which "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Languages, 2016, para. 2). Terms such as *misinformation*, *disinformation*, and *fake news* became ubiquitous, and numerous publications (Banks, 2016; Bush, 2017; Najmabadi, 2017) stressed the importance of teaching students and the general public to evaluate sources. One might say that the *Framework* reenvisioned information literacy for academic librarians just as the salience of information literacy entered the national spotlight.

The *Framework* (ACRL, 2016) identified six frames, or "conceptual understandings," that learners must grasp in order to be information literate (p. 7). Of those frames, "Authority is Constructed and Contextual" was particularly relevant to current events. The brief version of the authority frame reads as follows:

Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required. (ACRL, 2016, p. 12)

In other words, authority is about determining which sources to grant influence, to what extent, and under what circumstances—a key skill at a time of rampant mis- and disinformation.

The authority frame also contained a flashpoint, however. Its claim that authority is socially constructed meant that authority was not a feature of some sources that are inherently better than others but, rather, a product of shared perceptions among people in community. That claim has been the main focus of debates about authority in academic library scholarship. The conservative perspective is that authority must retain an essential link to notions of truth and/or factuality, lest we succumb to senseless relativism. In contrast, librarians who are committed to social justice in information literacy—especially the imperative to center and

uphold voices that have long been marginalized by dominant academic ideas of authority—widely embrace the constructionist understanding of authority as critical to their work.

In the current political moment, the stakes of such debates are high. The purveyors of post-truth politics, without ever having glanced at the *Framework*, know where they stand on the question of authority. “Flood the zone with shit,” Trump adviser Steve Bannon reportedly once said (Lewis, 2018, para. 79). Overwhelmed by competing and contradictory information, the thinking goes, people will give up on discernment in favor of accepting the authority of their political community or chosen leader. Several years later, that political community is most often the Republican Party, and that leader is (still) most often Donald Trump. The ideology they represent, and whose authority they champion, is widely accepted to be white patriarchy. And so for librarians, the question of what we can or should do to combat mis- and disinformation collides with the question of where our trust in information comes from in the first place, all while the strain of constructionism that seeks social justice is met by a form of post-truth politics that weaponizes relativism in the interests of the ruling class.

This article intervenes in the debate about authority in academic librarianship with attention to the larger political context in which that debate is taking place. It begins by reviewing recent library scholarship on authority in order to illustrate the debate thus far. The article’s larger purpose is threefold. First, it analyzes the most significant theoretical work on authority from philosophy and information studies in order to explicate the concept. Second, it draws on that explication to identify three specific components of authority that are under-addressed in library literature: a) the distinction between cognitive authority and political authority, b) the means by which authority is recognized or granted to a source, and c) the relationship between a source’s authority and the features (such as author, publisher, etc.) of that source. Third, it illustrates why each of those under-addressed components is important to speaking and teaching about information literacy effectively in the United States’ current political climate.

Authority in Library Scholarship

Library scholarship that examines authority has followed several patterns. Some recent publications accept the *Framework*’s definition and employ it to suggest effective teaching methods (Dudley, 2020; Foskey & Roper, 2020; Heffernan, 2020; O’Neill, 2021; Pullman, 2018; Ward, 2022; White, 2019) or conduct research on students’ understanding of authority (Crist & Popa, 2020; Rosenzweig et al., 2020). Others, however, grapple directly with the concept of authority itself. These publications overwhelmingly address the *Framework*’s claim that authority is constructed, and they fall into three main categories: writers who challenge the constructionist idea of authority, writers who embrace that understanding, and writers who attempt to either reconcile the former views or proffer their own definitions.

Rinne (2016, 2017) has offered the most vociferous arguments against the *Framework's* definition of “authority as constructed and contextual.” Rinne (2017) objects to that formulation on the grounds that “its failure to acknowledge the truth’s relation to authority is untenable” (p. 55). Truth, for Rinne (2016), connects to a form of verifiable fact or reality. In positing authority and truth as inextricably linked, he implies that authority must inhere in those sources that come closest to the truth. Badke (2015), in a related argument, decries the uncoupling of authority from expertise. Badke focuses particularly on how the web and postmodernism collapse distinctions, making any source as potentially authoritative as any other. Such arguments appeared even before the *Framework*. Meszaros (2010) addresses the way students’ developing epistemology and simple lack of experience mean they not only struggle to recognize authority but even deny the concept’s importance. Meszaros equates authority with expertise; neither Rinne nor Badke, for their part, offers a direct definition of authority. Underlying all three arguments, however, is an assumption that authority belongs to certain sources of information that are higher quality than others.

Writers in the second category—those who embrace the idea that authority is “constructed and contextual”—still often do so in the context of critiquing the *Framework*. Battista et al. (2015), in a call for the *Framework* to more explicitly address social justice, critique it for neither “outlining opportunities for students to consider and interrogate the motivations behind constructing and establishing academic authority” nor “look[ing] at the economic and political incentives and motivations for establishing and maintaining ‘established power and authority structures’ within the scholarly conversation” (pp. 118-119).¹ Watkins’s (2017) close reading of the authority frame ties its academic orientation to its Western-centric underpinnings. Watkins observes that the frame presumes “Western academic knowledge” to always be authoritative, even if it recognizes that such knowledge must at times be questioned (p. 16). “Marginalized voices,” on the other hand, can only occasionally be authoritative: in “unlikely situations” or in case of a “specific need” (p. 16). I have previously argued that the *Framework* opens itself up to such critiques—that is, the charge of under-commitment to its own definition of authority as “constructed and contextual”—by being self-contradictory. In claiming that “authority represents expertise,” for example, or in referring to “indicators of authority” that learners come to recognize, the *Framework* suggests that authority is not, in fact, entirely constructed (Bluemle, 2018, p. 18). According to the authority frame, certain “indicators” are still inherent to all forms of authority (p. 18).

Writers who take the constructionist view often do so as a way of upholding voices that are historically marginalized in academics. For example, Waity and Crowe (2019) describe a

¹ The quotation within the cited passage comes from the “Scholarship as Conversation” frame of the ACRL *Framework* (2016, p. 20).

project for a course on poverty in which college students interacted with children from the local community. In doing the project, “students learned about forms of cognitive authority and knowledge situated within a community versus traditional scholarly authority, and that both types of authority have different kinds of validity, depending on context” (p. 64). Watkins (2017) describes a class on Indigenous art in which students are encouraged to “grapple with multiple ways that different cultures and communities construct authority, as well as the ways the West systematically marginalizes and trivializes alternate forms of authority” (p. 18). To recognize “inclusive authorities,” in Watkins’s words, is to “understand that indigenous [*sic*] authority is different from but not less than Western conceptions of authority” (p. 18). Pashia (2017), in an article about teaching #BlackLivesMatter, emphasizes the importance of students’ learning to “identify a need for a counter-hegemonic narrative that is not readily available in the scholarly record” (p. 94). “Academic credentials signify authority in some contexts,” Pashia writes; “however, students need to ... consider other ways of constructing authority, especially when researching a topic like Black Lives Matter or other social justice movements” (p. 95). As Rapchak (2019), who analyzes the *Framework* through the lens of critical race theory, argues, “an anti-racist approach to information literacy goes beyond recognizing ‘that unlikely voices can be authoritative’ ... and instead centers perspectives that have been traditionally written out of history because of systemic racism” (p. 186).² Rapchak, along with Waity and Crowe, Watkins, and Pashia—all of whom write from the standpoint of critical information literacy—shows how a constructionist approach to authority is closely tied to social justice.

A third category of writers offer their own definitions of authority, which often seek to clarify or reconcile the constructionist and anti-constructionist views. Hofer et al. (2018), in their book, *Transforming information literacy instruction: Threshold concepts in theory and practice*, define authority as “a form of intellectual trust granted by an individual or community to an information source. It is both constructed, built through expertise and persistent reliability, and contextual, limited to certain knowledge domains or situations and shaped by community norms” (p. 58). This definition is more precise than the *Framework* about what “constructed” and “contextual” mean. In the *Framework* (ACRL, 2016), authority is “contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required” (p. 12), while Hofer et al. include spheres of knowledge and the role of culture in determining authority. Where the *Framework* says that “authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority” (p. 12), these authors are clear that authority is “constructed” from the accumulation of qualities like expertise and consistently high-quality results.

² In the cited passage, Rapchak quotes the authority frame of the *Framework* (ACRL, 2016, p. 12).

Other writers attempt to more explicitly reconcile the idea of authority-as-constructed with the objections of its detractors. Saunders and Budd (2020), acknowledging that many librarians believe authority should connect to truth, suggest using approaches from philosophy to ascertain what truth is. They also emphasize that every academic discipline has its own approach to understanding the world; students should be taught those approaches explicitly, so that they can understand the grounding of disciplinary claims and avoid relativistic thinking. The most sophisticated reconciliation comes from Baer (2018), who advocates approaching the *Framework* via “conceptions of relativism that challenge the extremes of both absolute truth and of absolute relativism” (p. 72). Weak relativism and feminist standpoint theory, according to Baer, both honor the importance of cultural differences and the contextual nature of knowledge, while acknowledging the possibility of shared truths. Weak relativism holds that “some values and rights transcend culture and should not be considered open for negotiation” (p. 74). Feminist standpoint theory “posits that communities are essential to determining knowledge and that the ‘most objective truths are those validated by different standpoints’” (pp. 74-75).³ The two theories offer lenses through which we can acknowledge authority’s construction and promote social justice without succumbing to absolute relativism.

The nature and intensity of the debate over authority are revealing. Despite the *Framework*’s ratification, the library profession clearly does not have an agreed-upon understanding of authority. The debate would not be so extensive if we did. Additionally, the fact that the discussion has overwhelmingly addressed one topic—the social construction of authority—shows how constructionism touches much of librarianship’s self-concept, from the question of how we define our responsibility to learners, to urgent and growing concerns about how the profession has contributed to systemic injustice.

This article makes two contributions to the conversation about how authority should be defined in information literacy. First, the article turns away from the *Framework* to focus, instead, on what philosophical and theoretical work on authority can contribute to librarians’ understanding. Considering how extensively the authority frame of the *Framework* has already been litigated, it is clear that that document alone cannot provide librarianship the answers it seeks. Original scholarship on authority points to a clearer definition. Second, having synthesized and articulated a definition from that original scholarship, the article considers the implications for information literacy. The scholarship shows authority to be inescapably social, and the understanding I propose ultimately aligns with the constructionist view. However, that is not enough on its own. A close look at how authority actually functions reveals components of authority that are key to information literacy, but often overlooked. In examining them here, I

³ In the cited passage, Baer quotes Collins (1989). See Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of Black feminist thought. *Signs*, 14, 745-773. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174683>

hope to suggest ways that librarians can more effectively and precisely address this important concept.

Authority in Philosophy and Theory

In order to understand authority as addressed in librarianship, one must first clarify how that is different from other types of authority. Theorists of authority distinguish between *deontic authority* and *epistemic authority*, where the term *deontic* derives from *deontology*, or the study of duty and obligation (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022). Bocheński (1965) first drew this distinction, noting that “the epistemic authority is that of an expert, the deontic authority that of a commander or superior” (p. 167). Or, as De George (1976) explains it, the former is “an authority,” while the latter is “in authority” (p. 78). Wilson (1983) refers to epistemic authority as *cognitive authority*—the term with which most librarians are familiar—and deontic authority as *administrative authority*, but the distinction is the same:

Administrative authority ... involves a recognized right to command others, within certain prescribed limits. But the world’s leading authority on butterflies, say, has no power to command. He cannot tell people what to think. ... The person whom I recognize as having cognitive authority is one whom I think should be allowed to have influence on my thinking ... (p. 14)

The form of authority that appears in the *Framework*, and that librarians refer to in the classroom when they teach students to evaluate sources, is epistemic or cognitive authority. As a concept in information literacy, cognitive authority traces most directly back to the work of Wilson. In the context of this essay, any use of the term *authority* by itself will refer to cognitive authority; any reference to a form of deontic authority will be designated as such.

Once the distinction between forms of authority is clear, the next question becomes: what, exactly, is cognitive authority? Wilson (1983), De George (1976), and Rieh (2010) all offer instructive analyses. Wilson’s is perhaps the best-known and most influential among librarians. He devoted a now-classic monograph, *Second-hand knowledge: An inquiry into cognitive authority*, to the topic in 1983. Near the beginning of *Second-hand knowledge*, Wilson defines *cognitive authority* as “influence on one’s thoughts that one would consciously recognize as proper. The weight carried by the words is simply the legitimate influence they have” (p. 15). If a source—a well-known encyclopedia, a government office, or simply a person I happen to know—has earned my respect such that I allow its or their pronouncements to guide my thinking, that source is one of my authorities.

Authorities, Wilson (1983) emphasizes, exist within spheres of influence, meaning that they are viewed as authoritative on particular subjects, by particular groups of people. An

academic expert, for example, might be viewed as authoritative within their area of specialization by other experts in the field, even as they remain unknown to the broader public. Another academic might gain substantial authority on a subject in segments of the public sphere, although their work on the same subject is widely rejected by other experts. According to Wilson, authority also exists to varying degrees. That is, I might have absolute trust in one or more of my authorities, so that I accept without question anything they might say. Another authority might earn my trust within a specific sphere, somewhat less trust in a related sphere, and none at all in other areas of life. These concepts of spheres and degrees of authority are much of what the *Framework* alludes to when it defines authority as “contextual.”

Implied in all of the above is that cognitive authority as defined by Wilson (1983) does not reside in the source. Rather, it is determined by the person or people who recognize the source as an authority. This subtlety is easy to overlook, because Wilson acknowledges that some sources, at least to most people, appear objectively unworthy of being cognitive authorities. For example, in a passage about the distinction between expertise and authority, Wilson observes that one might develop expertise in a subject, such as astrology, that is widely discredited. He continues:

The question is whether one should believe even a very expert astrologist, whether expertise warrants cognitive authority. For most of us (or most sensible people—there are huge numbers of people for whom astrology is still a serious subject with serious authorities), the answer is that it does not. (p. 27)

The language in this passage aligns Wilson with what are assumed to be the majority of his readers: “sensible” people who do not believe in astrology. However, he is clear that believers in astrology have real authorities on the subject. Those authorities remain true authorities for believers in astrology as long as they are viewed as justifiably influencing the believers’ thoughts.

Other theorists similarly emphasize that cognitive authority is determined by the person or people who recognize that authority. De George’s (1976) definition of *epistemic authority* predates Wilson’s (1983) book, but De George, too,

link[s] epistemic authority to the acknowledgement of that authority by the subject of authority. Thus, no matter how authoritatively x may speak, or how legitimate an authority he may be, he does not have de facto authority unless his utterances are believed. Conversely, x may be a de facto epistemic authority for y, though in fact x is not a legitimate authority, and there are no good reasons for y to believe what x asserts. (p. 80)

De George uses the term *legitimate* differently than Wilson. For Wilson, *legitimacy* refers to the extent to which a person consciously sees an authority's influence as proper. For De George it means the extent to which an authority deserves that designation, presumably as determined by people who know how to assess the evidentiary and logical integrity of a source. But a cognitive authority for De George still does not function as such unless it has subjects who recognize that authority.

Rieh (2010) draws *credibility* into her definition of cognitive authority. Credibility arises from a combination of trustworthiness and expertise, where *trustworthiness* is the "perceived goodness and morality of the source" and *expertise* "reflects perceived knowledge, skill, and experience of the source" (Rieh, 2010, pp. 1337-1338). Cognitive authorities are those sources that actually influence a person's thinking, and they are drawn from among the sources that person deems credible (Rieh, 2010). It is no accident that Rieh uses the word "perceived" to define both trustworthiness and expertise (pp. 1337-1338). "Credibility," Rieh writes, "does not reside in an information object, source, or person, although the characteristics of the foregoing can serve as the bases for people's assessment. It is people who ultimately make judgments of information credibility" (p. 1338). If credibility is determined by people's perceptions and judgments, then so, too, is cognitive authority.

Sources of Cognitive Authority

Wilson (1983) defines several of what he calls *bases* of authority: reasons a person might hold for allowing a source to influence their thinking. One commonly-cited basis, for example, is expertise, as defined by training and/or credentialing. Others include reputation—both inside and outside the authority's sphere of influence—and past performance, that is, the source's record of providing high-quality information on a subject (Wilson, 1983). People can also recognize authorities intuitively. Wilson notes that authority may come from a person's finding a source "intrinsically plausible, convincing, or persuasive"; it may also be assigned on the basis of "personal trust" (pp. 24-25).

Since the publication of *Second-hand knowledge*, a variety of qualitative studies have attempted to define additional potential bases of cognitive authority. Many of these studies examine users' assessment of information on social media or the web, and they paint a complicated picture of people's functional approach to authority. Bases posited by such studies include a source's:

- language and quality of writing (Mansour & Francke, 2017),
- personal experience with the relevant topic (Mansour & Francke, 2017; Metzger et al., 2010),

- alignment with the information-seeker's own values or preexisting beliefs (Ma & Stahl, 2017; Mansour & Francke, 2017; Metzger et al., 2010),
- and emotional validation of the information-seeker (Ma & Stahl, 2017).

This short list of examples is enough to illustrate the complexity of authority judgements, and the way both rational and emotional biases come into play.

The examples also shed light on authority as a social phenomenon. For example, Metzger et al. (2010) see alignment with one's preexisting values as inevitably social in its appeal to "collective intelligence" (p. 415). We recognize some people as more trustworthy than others if they are "substantially similar" to us (p. 423). Authority in this case rests on a kind of in-group/out-group differentiation.

Wilson (1983), too, sees authority as social in nature. On the most basic level, "authority is a relationship involving at least two people" (p. 13): the authority (whether that is a person, an institution made up of people, or a source created by one or more people) and a minimum of one person who recognizes that authority as legitimate. The way we come to recognize authority is also social. Relying on reputation as a basis, for example, means that a group's assessment will guide one's own. Wilson also emphasizes the social in his discussion of academic knowledge production, where he addresses the influence of fashion in research. We see the influence of fashion, he argues, when researchers come to "prefer a new style," or approach, "from the unconscious influence on one's own taste of recognition of others' changes of taste" (p. 62). In other words, individuals' judgments of what is important are influenced by other people's judgments of the same, and, in that way, research fields evolve.

Other theorists of cognitive authority place even greater emphasis on the social nature of authority. Addelson (1983), for example, uses authority as a lens through which to understand the social elements of scientific endeavor. No paradigm becomes ascendant purely through merit or the exercise of reason, Addelson argues. Instead, a variety of "social factors" (p. 177), such as prestige, institutional power, funding, and the professional backgrounds of individual scientists come into play in determining which paradigms become authoritative. The scientific community, Addelson warns, ignores the social nature of cognitive authority at its peril. In a different vein, Jordan (1997) introduces the concept of *authoritative knowledge*, or "the knowledge that within a community is considered legitimate, consequential, official, worthy of discussion, and appropriate for justifying particular actions by people engaged in accomplishing the tasks at hand" (p. 58). For Jordan, authoritative knowledge at its best is "horizontal," that is, distributed among individuals in a non-hierarchical fashion such that the group "construct[s] a joint way of seeing the world" (p. 60). As an example, Jordan cites her study of childbirth in Yucatan, where "there is no single decision-maker ... Rather, the store of knowledge required for

conducting a birth is created and recreated by all participants jointly as they do the work of birthing” (p. 60). As different as Addelson’s and Jordan’s conceptions are, both demonstrate the importance of attending to the social elements of cognitive authority.

Cognitive Authority: In Summary

In this article I am arguing that the library and information literacy community should commit to a particular understanding of cognitive authority. This understanding arises from the most prominent theoretical work on the subject, and it proceeds as follows:

1. Cognitive authority and deontic or administrative authority are distinct concepts and should be treated as such.
2. Cognitive authority never inheres in any source of information. Rather, it is assigned, granted, or recognized—and may also be denied or retracted—by a person or group of people. That recognition/denial can occur through a variety of means and is both an individual and social process.
3. While the features of a source—such as the author’s credentials, the source’s use of evidence, and so on—may be used as potential bases for granting authority, their presence or absence should never be equated with authority or lack thereof.

A key underlying assumption of the above, as well as the remainder of this article, is that cognitive authority is one hundred percent socially constructed. In that respect, I am aligned with the librarians cited above who have embraced the constructionist elements of the *Framework*.

In taking an entirely constructionist approach to authority, however, I do deviate from Wilson’s (1983) work. As heavily as my analysis relies on Wilson, the differences should be clarified. Wilson is clear both that cognitive authority does not reside in a source of information, and that expertise and authority are not to be mistaken for one another. Yet, he also implies that a proper relationship exists, or ought to exist, between expertise and authority. For one thing, experts should have some “real knowledge of the world” if their expertise is to warrant authority; this is why “sensible people” do not recognize expert astrologers as authorities (pp. 26-27). While those experts remain true authorities for believers in astrology, Wilson nonetheless relegates such relationships to the category of “mistaken recognitions of cognitive authority” (p. 33). Expertise and authority do not uncouple entirely in Wilson’s work.

Second-hand knowledge (1983) is an example of social epistemology, an approach that contrasts with individual epistemology in its assumption that, in the words of Wilkinson (2015),

“the vast majority of things we believe are believed solely on the basis of our social and cultural interactions” (p. 29). Social epistemology “accepts the existence of objectivity and facticity” and “is heavily indebted to a realist conception of truth,” yet acknowledges that much of what we know, we know indirectly (p. 29). The first sentence of the chapter in which Wilson (1983) defines cognitive authority— “All I know of the world beyond the narrow range of my own personal experience is what others have told me” (p. 14)—grounds his work firmly in social epistemology.

The assumption that cognitive authority is one hundred percent socially constituted aligns more closely with social constructionism, which may be defined briefly as “the idea that human beings epistemologically construct the reality they perceive” (Mitcham & Ryder, 2006, p. 76). Constructionism has been identified by some as related to, but distinct from, social epistemology (Goldman & O’Connor, 2019) and by others as a “radical” form of social epistemology (Solomon, 2006, p. 85). Either way, the key difference is that a constructionist view of cognitive authority means acknowledging that the authority of a source has no necessary relationship to that source’s expertise, use of evidence, commitment to factual accuracy, and so on. Rather, any form of cognitive authority is real as long as it is perceived or treated as such by a person or community of people.

Cognitive Authority and Information Literacy

As introduced at the beginning of this article, I draw on writers such as Wilson (1983), Rieh (2010), and others who have treated cognitive authority in depth in order to highlight elements of authority that are under-addressed in academic library literature. These elements are summarized by the three numbered points in the previous section. Here I will treat each of those points in greater depth, using further analysis and/or representative examples to illustrate their importance to information literacy instruction.

1. Cognitive authority and deontic authority are distinct concepts and should be treated as such.

An explication of the forms of deontic authority is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the distinction between cognitive and deontic authority is important to addressing cognitive authority effectively in information literacy. With that in mind, I will refer to deontic authority in this section as *political authority* in order to highlight its relationship to power. Specifically, I am thinking of political authority as power without coercion, that is, the ability to prompt action from people because they accept the authority’s legitimacy (Weber, 1962). Though distinct, cognitive authority and political authority interact with one another in important ways.

Few library publications address the distinction between cognitive and political authority explicitly. As a result, the influence of political authority is often ignored in discussions of cognitive authority; at times, the two forms of authority are conflated with one another. A noteworthy exception comes from Hofer et al. (2019), who devote attention to the distinction and intersections. As these authors observe, the layperson's—and average student's—implicit understanding of authority is nearly always political. “For many populations in the United States,” Hofer et al. write, “the authorities have become synonymous with deportation officers from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, police officers acquitted for murdering unarmed black Americans, or countless managers and executives willing to ignore sexual harassment and assault” (p. 64). Students who hold such conceptions of authority may experience understandable “cognitive dissonance” on being told by a librarian that “authority is necessary for a successful essay” (p. 64). The common association of the term *authority* with political authority, in other words, poses a challenge for the teaching of cognitive authority that librarians must recognize.

Simply making the distinction between cognitive and political authority is not enough, however, because the two interact. Bossaller (2014) presents one example in a study of online conversations about vaccination. Bossaller, like Hofer et al. (2019), observes that the public largely associates authority with its political forms. This association creates a challenge when, “in public health, the authorities themselves are funding or doing research, publishing results, and recommending health practices that are enforced by law” (p. 236). While Bossaller's (2014) study was published well before COVID-19, the pandemic has only reaffirmed the salience of this observation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is, indeed, a cognitive authority—a status it claims based on research and expertise—for many Americans. These Americans voluntarily decide to wear masks or obtain COVID vaccinations, because they view the CDC as a legitimate influence on their thinking. They conclude that such measures are effective because the CDC says so. For many others, the CDC is not a legitimate cognitive authority. Its claims to expertise and status as a national governmental organization strike these Americans as elitist and contrary to the interests of ordinary people. A particular challenge arises when the CDC's cognitive authority translates to political authority in the form of local governments and organizations, both public and private, that issue mask and vaccine mandates on the basis of CDC and other medical guidance. A person's orientation to the CDC as a cognitive authority informs their response to that exercise of political authority. The latter likely seems legitimate to those who recognize the CDC as a cognitive authority. Those who do not will likely experience it as a more direct exercise of power: a requirement to obtain a vaccine, get frequent COVID tests, seek an exemption, or even lose employment against their wishes.

Recognizing the distinction and intersections between cognitive and political authority becomes even more urgent when the intersection occurs in the information literacy classroom,

where political authority, the cognitive authority of librarians, and the concept of cognitive authority all come into play. All teaching librarians experience this three-way intersection regularly, even if our political authority seems marginal on the surface to those of us who do not assign grades. Considering social identity allows us to see why. Librarianship remains an overwhelmingly white profession (Rosa & Henke, 2017), which many practice in predominantly white colleges and universities. In this situation, white librarians are implicitly aligned with the dominant group, the group that defines the culture and norms of the institution and asserts political authority to require students to take certain actions for advancement and graduation. By contrast, Brown et al. (2018) illustrate how the whiteness of librarianship and academics is deeply oppressive for librarians of color in that whiteness invisibly, self-perpetuatingly defines the values and expectations by which all are measured. Thus, librarians with any number of relationships to political authority—one could consider gender, sexuality, class, ability, and other categories of identity, as well—enter the classroom to teach.

These librarians are met by students who hold a variety of pre-existing relationships to political authority and constructions of cognitive authority. Students are all subject, to a greater or lesser extent, to the political authority of the institution to set graduation requirements, assign grades, and so on. In that sense, they may, in fact, view librarians—regardless of any individual librarian’s identity—as indirect sources of political authority. As institutional representatives, librarians can explain how to conduct the research that professors expect, so that the students can earn high grades. Beyond that, students’ relationship to the group in power varies as much as librarians’, and students may find themselves speaking to librarians whose relationship to power aligns closely, or not at all, with their own. This alignment may well affect a student’s recognition of any given librarian’s cognitive authority, or the extent to which that librarian can influence the student’s thinking in a meaningful way.

None of what I say here about the whiteness of academics or the relationship between librarians, students, and power is new. However, I intentionally sketched the ideas of the last two paragraphs in the language of political and cognitive authority, in order to show how intricately they operate and intersect in the classroom. When librarians teach *about* cognitive authority, they bring all the complexity of the above to bear in addition to the topic of the class itself. How does an underrepresented student experience the suggestion to challenge accepted forms of cognitive authority when it comes from a white, cishetero librarian? As legitimate? Performative? What cognitive authority does the student grant the librarian to make such a suggestion? How does a student who has had ambivalent experiences with professors’ political authority grapple with the academic community’s idea of cognitive authority? To what extent do students’ information literacy practices reflect the real cognitive authority of professors and librarians, and to what extent are they the product of the institution’s political authority to require certain things from students in exchange for a degree? What impact do students’

experiences with the political authority of the state have on their constructions of cognitive authority?

These questions are difficult to answer, but all of them are directly relevant to the day-to-day practice of teaching authority in information literacy. My intention is not to answer them here but, rather, to say that librarianship cannot ask such questions effectively—let alone analyze them—without clear operating distinctions between political and cognitive authority. The point that deontic authority and cognitive authority are two different things, and should be treated as such, may seem pedantic at first. In fact, it is what allows us to see the triple-layered complexity of political authority, the librarian's cognitive authority, and cognitive authority as a topic of discussion that manifests in the information literacy classroom.

2. Cognitive authority never inheres in any source of information. Rather, it is assigned, granted, or recognized--and may also be denied or retracted--by a person or group of people. That recognition or denial can occur through a variety of means and is both an individual and social process.

The library profession's response to the phenomena of mis- and disinformation, fake news, and post-truth politics—particularly as they arose after Donald Trump's election to the United States presidency in 2016—best illustrates the importance of this point. Briefly put, a majority of that professional response has assumed that authority does inhere in certain sources of information. As I will show, however, that assumption leaves much complexity unaddressed. Only an approach that acknowledges the way individuals and groups construct authority by recognizing it in some sources and under some circumstances, and denying it in others, can begin to address fake news adequately.

Literature reviews of academic library publications on fake news since 2016 show that a majority of these publications approach fake news as a problem of information literacy. Sullivan (2019) finds a tendency in the literature to assume that there are good and bad sources of information, that many people are unable to distinguish between the two effectively, and that information, news, digital, and/or media literacies are the antidote. Revez and Corujo's (2021) more recent review concludes that the tendency documented by Sullivan is ongoing, with the conversation focused on teaching students and other library patrons to identify high-quality information rather than understanding the role of emotion and related factors in a post-truth environment.

This common tendency that Sullivan (2019) and Revez and Corujo (2021) identify has two underlying assumptions that are key for a discussion of cognitive authority. First, suggesting that good and bad sources exist centers attention on the qualities of the sources themselves, that

is, the characteristics that inhere in them. Second, the focus on information literacy instruction assumes that the potency of fake news is due primarily to people's ability, or lack thereof, to evaluate sources effectively. Both these assumptions are contrary to the constructed view of cognitive authority as suggested by the *Framework* and elaborated in the scholarship I addressed above, because they focus on the sources themselves rather than the human process of recognizing and withholding authority.

Post-truth thinking is characterized far less by ignorance of good and bad sources than a particular approach to assigning cognitive authority. According to this approach, sources such as Tucker Carlson, *Breitbart*, and One America News have authority, while sources produced by academic, governmental, and mainstream media elites do not. Understanding how that comes to be reveals much that a focus on the qualities of the sources themselves obscures. Indeed, post-truth thinking relies on very real bases of authority such as those introduced above: emotional validation, for example, or alignment with one's own personal value system. Bases like these are powerful because of "identity protective cognition," the "basic premise" of which, according to Kahan (2017), "is that *culture* is prior to *fact* in the apprehension of societal risks" (p. 2). In other words, bases of authority that arise from people's commitment to their social groups, and the values expressed by those groups, will outweigh more seemingly rational bases because of the large potential costs—the social alienation or "estrangement from others on whom one depends for support, material and emotional"—associated with going against the group (p. 2). And is identity protective cognition truly irrational? Rini (2017) argues that in areas with a political or moral valence, it can, in fact, be "individually reasonable" to give greater credence to information from fellow partisans (p. E50). Common group membership may be taken as a sign that we are "epistemic *peer[s]* in normative domains" (p. E51). Many educators might decry the reach of mis- and disinformation, but we cannot argue that its authority is anything less than real, or even rational, for its adherents.

Recognizing the powerful social component in the reach of so-called fake news, a small number of librarians and others have sought to identify those social forces more precisely. Communication studies scholars Mejia et al. (2018) observe that "post-truth criticism ... often assumes that the problems plaguing the world are due to a lack of knowledge as opposed to the possessive investment of a particular ideology" (p. 114). That ideology, they argue, is whiteness, which currently sees itself as under threat. Teaching people to recognize misinformation will not eliminate the ideological undercurrent; rather, the ideological undercurrent is what gives rise to a post-truth environment (Mejia et al., 2018). Librarian Wade (2018), drawing in part on Mejia et al., states bluntly that "*the cause of disbelief* [in so-called high-quality sources] *is Racism*" (para. 56). Wade questions whether librarianship has any role at all in addressing misinformation given the larger ideological and structural issues at play.

Clearly, equating authority with certain types and characteristics of sources—rather than examining the complex social processes of granting and withholding authority—obscures much about post-truth politics, to the point of denying the underlying social and political forces, ideologies, and the history of American racism. Therefore, as mis- and disinformation continue to proliferate in connection with events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the January 6 insurrection, and Russia’s war in Ukraine, librarians must be mindful about how they speak and teach about authority. First, understanding that authority is granted by people, not inherent in sources, means we must temper our attention to source evaluation. This is not to say that evaluation skills are unnecessary. As the Stanford History Education Group (Weinburg et al., 2016) has demonstrated, students do require guidance, particularly with online sources. Mejia et al. (2018), too, acknowledge that such education is much needed. However, a nuanced understanding of authority forces us to recognize that authority ultimately comes from people, which means shifting information literacy instruction from a focus on *what* sources to trust to *why* we trust the sources that we do. This means addressing not just epistemic factors, such as cognitive bias, but also the social component of authority. Students can be asked to consider:

- how their own decisions—their gut instincts about what information they trust—have been influenced by social groups including their families, faith communities, political parties, countries, or cultures of origin, and so on,
- how those decisions vary by context, and
- their assessment of their own constructions of authority. Are they happy with the decisions they have been making?

Lest we accidentally suggest to students that academics are somehow immune to social forces, emphasizing the constructedness of academic authority, including debates about peer-review or discussion of the historical whiteness of academe, helps students see that *all* forms of cognitive authority are ultimately social.

The suggestions here are not meant to assert that more careful attention to authority can address fake news where standard approaches to source evaluation cannot. As Mejia et al. (2018) demonstrate, misinformation and disinformation are not solvable by information literacy, because of their ideological and structural underpinnings. Rather, my argument is that library instruction can and should be more attentive to what is actually happening in the post-truth information environment. Librarians can even accompany that attention with a stance on what they believe *should* be authoritative, as long as they acknowledge that their assignment of authority is no more or less a product of social forces than any other. Such acknowledgement opens the possibility of considering what those forces are, and how all of us are subject to them

in some form. Respecting all constructions of authority—even those we may find distasteful— as real authority is the first step toward those conversations.

3. While the features of a source—such as the author’s credentials, the source’s use of evidence, and so on—may be used as potential bases for granting authority, their presence or absence should never be equated with authority or lack thereof.

The importance of this point is best illustrated through a close look at how a particular feature of texts—the quality of their language—has come to be widely equated with authority, and the detrimental consequences of that association for many speakers and writers. As addressed above, the research of Mansour and Francke (2017) demonstrates that a source’s use of language and quality of writing may be used as a basis for granting or denying cognitive authority. Indeed, this basis appears frequently in everyday academic life. Librarians and scholars across disciplines are familiar with the need to adopt an academic register and use specialized vocabulary in order to garner attention and respect from their peers for their written work. Similarly, countless students in composition classes have been taught the importance of using correct, formal English in order to signal to readers that they deserve to be taken seriously.

Yet, scholarship has shown that this tight equation of so-called “standard English” with cognitive authority normalizes underlying power inequities and upholds white supremacy. Baker-Bell (2020) offers a noteworthy critique in her monograph, *Linguistic justice*, which dismantles the foundations in American education of what she terms Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. A key premise of Baker-Bell’s book is that standard English does not exist. Rather, the English of white mainstream speakers has come to be viewed as standard through the hegemony of the white middle class. Drawing on critical race theory, Baker-Bell notes that the normalization of linguistic racism—discrimination against someone’s language on the basis of race—is so thoroughgoing in the United States that “it is difficult to address because it is not acknowledged as a form of racism” (p. 16). While Baker-Bell is clear that linguistic racism affects many racialized groups in the U.S., she focuses on Black language and the effect on Black students when they are told that they must adopt what she terms White Mainstream English in order to succeed. Erasing a group’s language erases its identity, Baker-Bell demonstrates, and causes students to internalize white supremacy.

An argument about language might seem on the surface to belong in a composition classroom, but, in fact, linguistic racism directly implicates cognitive authority and the way authority is addressed within information literacy. The pervasive idea in the U.S. that standard English exists, that it corresponds to the language of the white middle class, and that everyone should adhere to it in order to advance in a capitalist economy is a sign that White Mainstream English has been recognized as an important basis of authority within a community. The

community in question, in this case, is the white middle class, which holds such hegemonic sway that even many speakers of other forms of English have come to accept that using so-called standard English is necessary to ground their own authority as speakers and writers.

Furthermore, the example of linguistic racism shows the immense harm of conflating a feature of a source with the authority of that source. Linguistic racism decrees that a written or spoken text must use White Mainstream English in order to be authoritative. White Mainstream English may not guarantee authority, but without it, authority is impossible. According to linguistic racism, the use of White Mainstream English is an innate or *inherent* basis of authority. That innateness is required for the effects Baker-Bell (2020) describes: for example, the invisibility of linguistic racism that makes it “difficult to address ... as a form of racism” (p. 16), or the way it insidiously makes people assume that White Mainstream English is somehow superior. Acknowledging the constructedness of language as a basis for authority would threaten linguistic racism by revealing the social origin of that basis, and the way something that was made can also be unmade.

That project—exposing the social origin and harms of assuming that the use of White Mainstream English is an inherent basis of authority—has been undertaken in a document titled, “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” (Baker-Bell et al., 2020), which was co-written by Baker-Bell and formally released by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in July 2020. The document affirms students’ right to their own language and demands, among other things, that teachers “stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm, which reflects White Mainstream English!” (Demand #1) and “stop teaching Black students to code-switch! Instead, we must teach Black students about anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy!” (Demand #2). Whereas white linguistic supremacy causes “the language of Black students [to be] monitored, dismissed, demonized—and taught from the positioning that using standard English and academic language means success” (Baker-Bell et al., 2020, Demand #1, para. 1) the document demands, instead, “the empowering of agentive political choices that call for the intentional employment of Black Language” (Demand #4, para. 1). As a web document with a broad intended audience of composition instructors, “This Ain’t Another Statement!” publicly reveals, denaturalizes, and suggests methods to dismantle the racist coupling of White Mainstream English and cognitive authority.

The example of linguistic racism shows the harm of equating a feature of a source with the presence or absence of authority, rather than recognizing that all bases of authority are always socially constructed. What are the implications for information literacy instruction? First, librarians must exercise caution in the way they speak about the bases of authority. Granted, the *Framework* (ACRL, 2016) says that “novice learners may need to rely on basic

indicators of authority, such as type of publication or author credentials” when evaluating sources (p. 12). Even when working with the newest college students, however, we can take care to tell them that peer-review is valued in the academic community (for example), rather than saying or implying that peer-reviewed sources *are* authoritative, which would suggest that peer-review is an inherent basis of academic authority. This may seem like a small shift, but it facilitates mindfulness in the teacher and hints at the complexities of authority to students from the beginning onwards.

Second, librarians should expand their attention beyond the most commonly-discussed bases of authority—features such as author credentials, currency, reputation of publisher, and so on—to encompass as many potential bases as we can possibly identify. As Baker-Bell (2020) shows, linguistic racism has made quality of language nearly invisible as a basis of authority for many people in the U.S., such that “standard English” is widely taken for granted as real and necessary rather than an oppressive creation of the white ruling class. How many other socially constituted bases of authority are (nearly) invisible in this way, and how can we bring them to light? Expanding our understanding of the bases of authority will complicate and deepen librarians’ engagement with source evaluation and reveal more hidden power structures at play.

Third, librarians should interrogate the power structures underlying all the potential bases of authority that we identify and recognize. Peer review is a good example of how this is already being done. While many academics arguably take the authority of double-blind peer-review for granted, librarians lead in exposing its failings and the way it reinforces the whiteness of academics. What if we interrogated every potential basis as thoroughly? What would sustained attention to identity-protective cognition (as addressed in the previous section), and the way it contributes to the emotional bases of authority, look like, and how could it change information literacy instruction? The prerequisite to investigations such as these—as it is to an understanding of linguistic racism—is consciously decoupling authority from the bases we use to assign that authority.

Making Intellectual Commitments

A common criticism of social constructionism is that it promotes relativistic thinking. According to this critique, to suggest that post-truth thinking and Black linguistic justice both deserve respect as genuine constructions of authority is also to reduce both to mere opinion. How can any form of authority be challenged if every form of authority is equal?

To that objection I would reply: recognizing that authority is socially constructed—that every form of authority is, in that sense, real—need not and should not preclude librarians, educators, students, or anyone, from making intellectual commitments. Other scholars dedicated to a constructionist view of authority also understand the need for such commitments.

For example, Rapchak (2019), who takes an anti-racist approach to the *Framework*, commits to the authority of “counterstories.” These are “not simply an acknowledgement of different views and opinions,” which would be pure relativism, “but a centering of something that entirely disrupts the primary narrative of a subject” (p. 186). Pashia (2017), who teaches #BlackLivesMatter, still asks students to question the authors and speakers of counterstories: “Are they an eyewitness to an event? Do they have a lived experience that counters the popular narrative? If so, is that just one anecdote, or do many other marginalized people report similar experiences?” (p. 95). Counterstories, too, are subject to examination before they can be granted authority.

In other words, we must all consider our own constructions of authority and decide what we choose to trust, and why. Librarians and educators can and should advocate for particular constructions and be prepared to defend them for the values they uphold. Claiming we cannot would be an abdication of intellectual responsibility. In fact, the constructedness of authority does not relieve us of that responsibility but rather forces us to acknowledge our choices *as* choices and, therefore, as actions that have individual and political consequences. It also forces us to give others’ constructions the respect they deserve, that is, to engage them, to be challenged by them, and to appreciate that they, too, have individual and political consequences.

Conclusion

An in-depth exploration of cognitive authority may seem pedantic or even unnecessary at a time when academic librarianship faces numerous challenges, from practical ones like implementing the *Framework* to existential matters like reckoning with the profession’s present and historical contributions to systemic injustice. Why give such extended analysis to a single concept, let alone use that analysis to make what may seem like overly nuanced changes in the way we speak, write, and teach about information literacy? Briefly put, while cognitive authority may be one narrow component of information literacy, it infuses countless matters of national and global significance.

As I already addressed, COVID-19 demonstrated how people’s willingness, or lack thereof, to assign cognitive authority to institutions can have grave consequences for public health. Lingering resentment about COVID restrictions could well shape the country’s ability to respond to the next pandemic. As Pashia (2017) shows, intentionally granting authority to voices and accounts long dismissed by the white ruling class is part of supporting #BlackLivesMatter. Similarly, during the #MeToo wave that began in 2017, the exhortation to “believe women” served as a demand for people to shift their instinctive recognition of authority from those who are accused of harassment and assault (usually, powerful men) to those making the accusations. The intense online vilification of Amber Heard during the Depp-Heard defamation case of 2022

led some to declare the end of #MeToo, meaning that the collective balance of cognitive authority has shifted back to the patriarchy—the status quo (Goldberg, 2022).

In the arena of national politics, the Capitol Insurrection of January 6, 2021, was fueled by disinformation suggesting that Donald Trump had rightfully won the 2020 presidential election, and the greater vote counts for Joe Biden must be a result of fraud. Many of the spurious fraud allegations centered on cities with large Black populations, especially Atlanta, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia, all of which helped Biden win their respective states (Summers, 2020). Identity protective cognition and an investment in white patriarchy—social and emotional bases of cognitive authority—explain much of the draw of such disinformation and why members of the far right would storm the Capitol on its authority. In the 2022 midterm elections, election denial remained powerful enough that Republican candidates nationwide included it in their platforms (FiveThirtyEight, 2022). While many of these candidates lost their races, post-election estimates still projected that the 118th United States Congress would include several senators and more than 150 representatives who questioned the results of the 2020 election (Rosen et al., 2022).

Cognitive authority is salient across the world at present, not just in the United States. In 2022, the most prominent example comes from Russia's war in Ukraine. As is well-known, Russian president Vladimir Putin has used disinformation, combined with a tight grip on his nation's media, to generate support for the war among Russians. The strategy involves sowing doubt and confusion, but also appeals to Russian social identity to legitimize the war among the Russian public (Smart, 2022; Thompson, 2022). Putin's disinformation campaign extends across the world on social media, attempting to claim authority for his narrative of the war over that of Europe and the United States (Myers & Frenkel, 2022). The extent to which he succeeds could have real consequences for the war's outcome.

In short, cognitive authority—the question of what sources of information we trust enough to allow them to guide our thoughts and decisions—is central to some of the most pressing national and global issues of the early 21st century. While education can by no means solve these issues, it also cannot ignore them. I align with those who argue that fake-news instruction and traditional source evaluation methods are not an answer. Instead, librarians must interrogate cognitive authority—what it is and how it works—down to its roots and bring all that analysis to bear on information literacy instruction that acknowledges the true complexity of people's relationship to information and how we decide what to trust. Such interrogation would hardly be an antidote to the world's ills, but, under the best of circumstances, it could lead to instruction that is more firmly grounded in the exigencies of the present moment.

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