



# Post-Facts: Information Literacy and Authority after the 2016 Election

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UNCLE LENNY: This guy [President Barack Obama]—he wants to have one country of North America, which is composed of Canada, the United States, and part of Mexico, if not all of Mexico. That’s why the existing laws, which dictate that border trespassers shall be deported, he chooses to ignore.

IRA GLASS: Well, no, he actually deported 2.5 million people. More than any other president.

UNCLE LENNY: I don’t believe that, Ira, for one minute. I don’t believe that.

IRA GLASS: [in voiceover] OK, I love my uncle. I remember crying as a kid when he went off to Vietnam. Back in the ’70s and ’80s, he hated liberal politicians, but he hated them because they were liberals . . . He didn’t believe these kind of dark conspiracies. That’s the thing that’s changed, for him, and lots of people, I think. And those numbers that I quoted him are true. They’re from the Department of Homeland Security.

*This American Life*, October 21, 2016<sup>1</sup>

No, I’m not going to give you a question. I’m not going to give you a question. You are fake news.

*President-elect Donald Trump to a CNN reporter, January 11, 2017*<sup>2</sup>

**abstract:** This article addresses the challenge that post-truth politics poses to teaching authority in information literacy. First, it isolates an element of the post-truth phenomenon, an element it calls *post-facts*, to elucidate why teaching source evaluation is not, by itself, an antidote to fake news or other evidence of Americans’ media illiteracy. Second, it addresses the implications of post-facts politics for the concept of authority as defined by the “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” drawing on the work of Patrick Wilson and Max Weber to illustrate which elements of authority librarians must rethink due to recent events.

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## Introduction

“Fake news” became ubiquitous during and after the United States presidential election campaign of 2016. Originally referring to fabricated stories on the Web that were shared as genuine news, the phrase quickly became more encompassing, coming to mean potentially any source that intentionally misleads, presents news in a hyper-partisan fashion, or even publishes satirical stories that could accidentally be taken as true.<sup>3</sup> In January 2017, the United States intelligence community reported that the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin had exercised a campaign of influence on the United States election, including “overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or ‘trolls.’”<sup>4</sup> These conclusions were not surprising to most observers; by this point, the question was not whether online disinformation, much of it propagated by Russia, had played a role in the election, but rather the extent of the influence.

Academics received a related shock in November 2016, when the Stanford History Education Group released a study that documented middle school, high school, and college students’ struggles to think critically about information they encounter online. “When it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, [digital natives] are easily duped,” the report concludes. “In every case and at every level, we were taken aback by students’ lack of preparation . . . We worry that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish.”<sup>5</sup>

Librarians and other educators responded with calls for a renewed commitment to information literacy. Publications ranging from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to *American Libraries* and *Library Journal* ran articles that highlighted students’ inability to critically evaluate information and called for greater attention to information literacy as the antidote.<sup>6</sup> Such arguments recognized a variety of factors. They acknowledged, for example, the difficulty of “convincing people to read an article that goes against their worldview with an open mind”<sup>7</sup> or the ramifications of college students learning about the news as it comes to them through social media rather than actively seeking out the events of the day.<sup>8</sup> But, ultimately, such observations were asides in a collective call to recommit to information literacy and source evaluation.

The primary purpose of this paper is to complicate this response by suggesting that the challenge librarians face goes much deeper than the inability of students and

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citizens to think critically about information. First, it will isolate an element of post-truth politics—an element I will call *post-facts*—that poses an inescapable challenge to the suggestion that teaching source evaluation is the best antidote to Americans’ news and media illiteracy. Second, it will address the implications of the post-facts phenomenon for the concept of authority as defined in the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) “Frame-

work for Information Literacy for Higher Education.” I will distinguish my reading of the frame “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” from those of other recent readings and elucidate which elements of authority we need to rethink in light of post-facts.



## Post-Truth or Post-Facts?

In November 2016, *Oxford Dictionaries* announced *post-truth* as its word of the year. “The concept of *post-truth* has been in existence for the past decade,” the *Dictionaries* press release states, “but Oxford Dictionaries has seen a spike in frequency this year in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States.” Its definition of *post-truth* (adjective): “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” The *Dictionaries* choice emphasized the primacy of emotion over demonstrable facts: “Rather than simply referring to the time after a specified situation or event—as in *post-war* or *post-match*—the prefix in *post-truth* has a meaning more like ‘belonging to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant.’”<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, other commentators wrote about the related expression *post-facts*. Some definitions and usages suggest *post-facts* merely as a less-common synonym for *post-truth*.<sup>10</sup> Yet, does *post-truth* as defined by *Oxford Dictionaries* fully specify what is at play, for example, in this article’s epigraph, when a voter will not or cannot believe that government statistics prove Barack Obama deported 2.5 million people during his presidency? Figures from the Department of Homeland Security establish that the Obama administration deported 2.43 million undocumented immigrants in the six-year time span of 2009 to 2014, compared to 2 million during the entire eight years of George W. Bush’s presidency.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, emotions are at work when a person does not believe such evidence. But the way the situation unfolds—that is, as simple denial of information from a supposedly authoritative source on the subject—also has important consequences.

At least two considerations of the term *post-facts* might identify missing factors. One is Germany’s Society for the German Language (GfdS), which chose *postfaktisch* as its own 2016 word of the year. The society acknowledges that *postfaktisch* derives from the English *post-truth*,<sup>12</sup> but its definition differs slightly from that of the *Oxford Dictionaries*. According to the GfdS press release:

The neologism *postfaktisch* . . . refers to the idea that today’s political and social discussions rely increasingly on emotions rather than facts. In their resentment against “those up above,” ever greater portions of the population are prepared to ignore facts and even readily accept obvious lies. It is not the claim to truth, but rather the expression of the “felt truth,” that leads to success in the “*postfaktisch* era.”<sup>13</sup>

Like the *Oxford Dictionaries*, the GfdS identifies the primacy of emotions over facts. But *postfaktisch*, notably, includes another component: resentment against elites.

Here in the United States, one month later, Francis Fukuyama tied *post-facts* directly to questions of intellectual authority:

Why do we believe in the authority of any fact, given that few of us are in a position to verify most of them? The reason is that there are impartial institutions tasked with producing factual information that we trust. Americans get crime statistics from the US Department of Justice, and unemployment data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Mainstream media outlets like the *New York Times* were indeed biased against Trump, yet they have systems in place to prevent egregious factual errors from appearing in their

copy. I seriously doubt that Matt Drudge or *Breitbart News* have legions of fact-checkers verifying the accuracy of material posted on their websites.<sup>14</sup>

Many librarians would note that sources like the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Labor Statistics are not infallible, and attention must be paid to methods of gathering and presenting data. Likewise, the *New York Times* not only was biased against Trump but also failed to predict his election to the presidency.<sup>15</sup> The *Times*, in other words, had its own deeply ingrained assumptions, some of which it began to acknowledge post-November 8, 2016.<sup>16</sup> But Fukuyama's assessment still echoes a value that is widely upheld by librarianship: the idea that some sources of information are more likely to be accurate than others and have greater reputations for reliability.

Fukuyama's article and the GfDS definition share a recognition of what leads to the present post-facts climate: loss of trust in traditional sources of authoritative information. In a January 2017 article, Beverly Gage observes that Donald Trump drew on an understanding of elitism that arose from mid-twentieth-century conservative thinking, which "redefin[ed] the term away from class and toward culture, where the 'elite' could be identified by its liberal ideas, coastal real estate and highbrow consumer preferences." Trump took the concept further, recasting "the 2016 election into a competition between knowledge systems: the tell-it-like-it-is 'people' versus the know-it-all 'elites,'" who could be either liberal or conservative. "The fact that he [won] dealt a blow to an entire worldview," Gage adds, "one in which empirical inquiry and truth-telling were supposed to triumph in the end."<sup>17</sup> Trump's political movement, along with the popular sentiments he so astutely detected and appealed to, is built on the idea that elites are characterized, at least in part, by their relationship to information.

Thus, if *post-truth* reflects a situation in which facts lose relevance and emotions become primary, *post-facts* helps us see where *post-truth* comes from. Post-facts politics were at play when the Republican Party's 2016 platform accused the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of "intolerance toward scientists and others who dissent from its orthodoxy,"<sup>18</sup> ignoring that the panel's so-called orthodoxy arises from an overwhelming consensus among climate scientists that the earth is warming due to human activity.<sup>19</sup> Donald Trump employed post-facts politics when he denied the intelligence report that declared Russia had attempted to influence the United States election in his favor, even though that report represented the joint conclusions of the Federal Bureau

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of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency. He continues to do so whenever he derides as "fake news" any news he happens to dislike.

A broader post-facts worldview is evident in the American public. Trump won the presidential election despite having the endorsement of only 2 of the 100 top-circulating newspapers in the country.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, a 2017 Pew study found that the percentage of Republicans who believe "colleges and universities have a negative effect on the country" jumped from 45 percent to 58 percent in the last year alone.<sup>21</sup> Both



cases indicate a rejection of mainstream institutions—colleges and universities, national and international organizations, and news media—and the information they provide. If such information cannot be trusted, then reliance on personal emotion becomes one possible recourse.

Beyond identifying Donald Trump as the central figure in the post-facts worldview, I do not wish to make generalizations about who engages in post-facts thinking or even why many people distrust institutions. Popular conversation often attributes Trump's win to white, working-class voters who face economic uncertainty. Yet, some analyses have brought that into question. The *Washington Post* observed, for example, that the majority of Trump voters were middle-income or higher.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, exit polls suggested that a greater proportion of Trump's voters were African-American and Latino than was the case for Mitt Romney in 2012.<sup>23</sup> And if Trump's base is more difficult to isolate than it seems at first glance, so is popular distrust of mainstream institutions. During the 2016 Democratic primary, supporters of Bernie Sanders accused news media of bias against him, and populists on both the left and right have been interpreted as disillusioned with elites. The key, then, is not to assign post-facts thinking to a particular group but rather to acknowledge it as a documented tendency in American culture and politics. Doing so allows us to recognize that any of our students may be inclined to distrust any source of information presented to them as reliable and committed to accuracy and, therefore, simply teaching them better methods of source evaluation is not enough.

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### Authority in the ACRL Framework

In facing such a problem—the central problem of a post-facts era—the logical place for academic librarians to turn is the ACRL “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.” Indeed, one of the six frames, “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual,” directly addresses the question of how learners evaluate sources of information, recognize degrees of authority, and determine which sources are appropriate to particular circumstances. The short version of the 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.<sup>24</sup>

Notably, the authority frame, along with the other frames, was first released in draft form in 2014. The task force that designed the Framework solicited feedback in several stages, but when ACRL formally adopted it in January 2016, the central concepts underlying

the authority frame remained as they had been in early 2014. In other words, the task force conceptualized and wrote the authority frame before the election campaign and before *post-truth* reached the forefront of Americans' consciousness. Therefore, it is not necessarily a given that the frame will speak to the current climate.

Even before November 8, 2016, the authority frame received critical questioning from at least two directions. One line of thinking is that, in positing authority as "constructed and contextual," the Framework effectively declares all forms of authority equally valid and, therefore, abdicates any commitment to the idea that some sources of information may be higher-quality or more accurate than others. A recent article by Nathan Rinne is the foremost example of this argument. Rinne deems the authority frame "untenable" because of "its failure to acknowledge the significance of truth's relation to authority."<sup>25</sup> Rinne denies that authority is—as he characterizes the constructionist view—"only a synonym for the successful use of power," arguing instead that authority "seems to be necessarily tied up with ideas of knowledge, experience, trust, truth, tasks and responsibility."<sup>26</sup> It is not clear how Rinne defines authority or what leads to the conclusion that it is "necessarily tied up" with these concepts.

Other significant critiques of the authority frame, as well as the entire Framework, have come from proponents of critical information literacy. These arguments hold that the authority frame does not do enough to question, or promote resistance to, the power structures that underlie traditional notions of authority. For example, Andrew Battista, Dave Ellenwood, Lua Gregory, Shana Higgins, Jeff Wilburn, Yasmin Sokkar Harker, and Christopher Sweet find that "the Framework would benefit by outlining opportunities [more than it currently does] for students to consider and interrogate the motivations behind constructing and establishing academic authority."<sup>27</sup> The failure to outline such opportunities reflects one of the Framework's unspoken assumptions: that it "is essentially describing normative academic research and knowledge practices," which, though "always fraught and contested . . . are historically largely shaped by cultures of dominance."<sup>28</sup> The implication of the argument

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Battista and his coauthors make is that the Framework posits authority as "constructed and contextual" without fully committing to its own claim; ultimately, the Framework still seeks to induct students into an existing system of authority, that is, academic culture. As Ian Beilin argues, the very fact that the frames originated as threshold concepts—concepts that, when grasped, produce transformative understanding of a field or subject area—suggests as much. Threshold concepts, by definition, articulate ideas a person must grasp to participate in an academic discipline; in doing so, they, and by extension the Framework itself, may "merely reinforce disciplinary boundaries and institutional hierarchies."<sup>29</sup> From the standpoint of critical information literacy, then, the Framework has a very different relationship to truth than what Rinne proposes; instead of abandoning the quest for truth, the Framework may instead reify apparent truths that are defined by existing power structures.

The Framework invites two such opposing critiques because of its internal contradictions, some of which the proponents of critical information literacy identify. Beilin,



for example, acknowledges that the Framework invites a critical pedagogy even as its reliance on threshold concepts reinforces academic power structures.<sup>30</sup> Maura Seale finds the Framework “explicitly interested in power relations” but ultimately “conflicted, internally contradictory, and ambivalent about . . . its understanding of power relations and standards.” In her analysis, the Framework, despite its interest in power, is grounded in classical liberal and neoliberal values.<sup>31</sup> In other words, critics recognize that the Framework is “trying to have it both ways.” The authority frame makes gestures toward social justice, as when it says, for example, that learners will come to “acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others’ worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations,” or that they should remain “skeptical of the systems that have elevated . . . authority and the information created by it.”<sup>32</sup> But it also ultimately assumes that learners must be inducted into academic culture and discourse. That learners’ orientation to information and social justice will be defined from within that mind-set, which is itself a product of historically dominant Western power structures, is the source of many critical objections.

The tension between the Framework’s effort to initiate students into academic culture and discourse, and its speaking of authority as “constructed and contextual,” has another important correlate: the frame’s definition of authority is neither clear nor consistent. That definition, and its implications for information literacy in a post-facts era, is the main interest of this paper, although I will return later to the frame’s relationship to social justice. The authority frame claims that authority is “constructed,” yet it simultaneously posits certain elements of authority as innate. In doing so, it gives insufficient attention to where authority comes from and to how the construction of authority occurs. Insofar as the frame advocates questioning authority, it does so from a social justice perspective; it does not consider, nor does it know what to do with, a form of questioning that exists outside or in opposition to, the tenets of twenty-first-century social justice. All of these limitations make the authority frame unprepared to fully address a post-facts climate.

### Defining Authority in Information Literacy

First, it is important to establish what, precisely, *authority* means in the context of the Framework. The title of the frame characterizes authority as “constructed and contextual.” But the closest the text of the frame comes to an explicit definition is to say that “authority is a type of influence recognized or exerted within a community.”<sup>33</sup> Responding to a 2014 draft of the Framework, Lane Wilkinson observes that its understanding of authority aligned closely with the definition of *cognitive authority* offered by the librarian and philosopher Patrick Wilson in his 1983 book, *Second-Hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority*. Wilson’s book, Wilkinson notes, is “one of the most widely read theoretical works on information literacy.”<sup>34</sup> That alignment with Wilson remains the case with the approved Framework.

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.”<sup>35</sup> The idea that authority is a form of “influence” that people “recognize” is what ties the two definitions—Wilson’s and the frame’s—most explicitly

together. The frame additionally says that the influence of authority happens “within a community.”<sup>36</sup> This, too, aligns well with Wilson, who emphasizes not only that no one can be an authority without at least one other person to recognize them as such but also that authority exists within a “sphere of interest.”<sup>37</sup> A biologist may be recognized as an authority in botany but not in human anatomy. Furthermore, an authority who is generally recognized within a certain community might not be deemed worthy of such recognition—even relative to the authority’s supposed sphere of interest—by everyone, either within that community or outside.<sup>38</sup> As the frame says, “Various communities may recognize different types of authority,” and “Many disciplines have acknowledged authorities . . . and yet . . . some scholars would challenge the authority of those sources.”<sup>39</sup>

Finally, Wilson tells us that the process by which authorities become recognized is important. Authority is “influence . . . that one would consciously *recognize as proper*.”<sup>40</sup> The frame gives significant attention to how one recognizes authority, ranging from the basic markers of credibility that a “novice learner” might employ, to the sophisticated approaches used by experts in a discipline, to the “informed skepticism” with which one should approach even the most seemingly authoritative of voices.<sup>41</sup> Several of the markers of credibility—such as “author credentials” or “well-known scholars . . . [who] are widely considered ‘standard’”<sup>42</sup>—that the frame addresses correspond well to at least some of what Wilson refers to as possible “bases” on which one can recognize an authority. These bases include expertise, professional reputation, and reliable performance.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, however, the frame is most interested in the rational bases on which learners might recognize or question authorities as they enter the academic environment, whereas Wilson is interested in how each of us, in our own lives, determine who our cognitive authorities are. This difference is significant to a post-facts cultural climate.

Before addressing authority in the post-facts context, however, it is worth considering Wilson’s work on cognitive authority next to discussions of authority more broadly. Wilson cites various other scholars without tracing his definition to any single one of them. Yet, Wilson’s concept of cognitive authority correlates in important ways to authority as understood by the sociologist Max Weber. Authority per Weber is what we might call political; it is the form of authority that regulates conduct and commands certain behavior. But even though cognitive authority has no “recognized right to *command* others,” consisting instead of “influence on one’s thoughts,”<sup>44</sup> the correlations between Wilson and Weber—the extent to which Wilson is Weberian—can help to illuminate cognitive authority as it operates in the present political climate.

For Weber, as for Wilson, authority exists in the context of a “social relationship,” which, in Weber’s words, “can be oriented on the part of the individuals to what constitutes their ‘idea’ of the existence of a *legitimate authority*.”<sup>45</sup> Legitimacy is key; legitimate authority “enjoys the prestige of being considered exemplary or binding” and ensures a “stable” relationship between the authority and those who are subject to it.<sup>46</sup> It is not incidental, then, that Wilson defines cognitive authority as “influence on one’s thoughts that one would consciously *recognize as proper*,” or that he follows this definition by noting that “the weight carried by the words is simply the *legitimate* influence they have.”<sup>47</sup> Authority cannot function properly as such unless those who submit to or acknowledge that authority see it as legitimate, as having the right to command or influence. Delegitimized, political authority cannot command unless it resorts to force.



Illegitimate cognitive authority has little influence on the thoughts and beliefs of those in whose eyes it has no right to such influence; it, too, is not a true authority.

Weber introduces as well the concept of “validity”: the likelihood or “probability” that people will in fact “orient” themselves “to what constitutes their ‘idea’ of the existence of a *legitimate authority*.”<sup>48</sup> A given authority may be “valid exactly insofar as it actually shapes the course of behavior.”<sup>49</sup> Validity, then, may be considered the extent to which an authority actually functions as such. Weber demonstrates that an authority may be valid even where it is “evaded or deliberately violated.” For example, a burglar who attempts to avoid being caught demonstrates the validity of the law, because its authority shapes his behavior.<sup>50</sup>

Wilson does not explicitly address validity, which is not surprising given that cognitive authority, unlike political authority, cannot command or shape people’s external behavior; it can only influence their thoughts. Perhaps his observation that cognitive authority is a matter of degree, meaning that people can allow authorities to shape their thoughts to a greater or lesser extent,<sup>51</sup> comes close. But validity is worth considering at a later point, when Wilson addresses the ways in which people come to recognize cognitive authorities through the course of their lives. He asks a familiar question about higher education:

Are those who set the tasks and evaluate performances recognized as cognitive authorities by those trying to pass the entrance requirements [to the professional world]? . . . For some [students] the teachers are recognized as having superior knowledge about the world. But for others, they are simply those who administer the entrance requirements for admission to desired places.<sup>52</sup>

The key here is that, when students complete the requirements necessary for a college degree—for example, by pursuing courses of study, taking exams, and completing assignments—they validate a form of political, but not necessarily cognitive, authority. The only thing students’ actions tell us for certain is that they recognize institutions of higher education as the gatekeepers that determine their “admission to desired places.”

Of course, it is nothing new for an educator to observe that students may view college as a series of “hoops to jump through.” In a post-facts climate, what is important to remember is that, when students explain the markers of source credibility and then populate their papers with

suitable sources accordingly, such behavior does not necessarily validate those sources of information as legitimate cognitive authorities. This is where the injunction to respond to fake news with more and better information literacy instruction falls short. Quite simply, with cognitive author-

ity it is possible to “fake it”; the cognitive authorities people appear to acknowledge on the surface may not be those they recognize as legitimate, that is, those that actually

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influence their thoughts. The act of “faking it” may or may not be entire; students may be influenced by unreliable sources even though they recognize that others are more credible and worthier of their attention. Perhaps this is a case of cognitive authority having legitimacy without much validity. The important point is that, since cognitive authority is ultimately about thoughts, appearances do not always match reality.

### Information Literacy and Authority in the Trump Era

The current political climate constitutes a crisis of legitimacy for traditional sources of cognitive authority. Librarians tend to imbue with authority the most reliable and credible sources of information. We teach that a climatologist’s study on global warming is more credible than a lay blogger’s opinion; that a mainstream news organization that

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practices investigative journalism will more likely be accurate about current events than highly partisan media; and that government census data better reflect actual nationwide trends than the latest Internet meme. In each case, we grant more cognitive authority to the source of information we find credible. When we question authority, it is, for example, to note the difficulties of replicating peer-

reviewed studies in the sciences; to acknowledge the forces that drive mainstream news organizations to privilege certain stories over others; or to weigh the consequences when a new presidential administration removes information its predecessor had posted on government websites. But many Americans currently do not see as legitimate cognitive authorities the sources of information—especially academics, the mainstream news media, and government organizations—that are most likely to be reliable, accurate, and credible.

What creates this situation? First, let us return to the relationship between political and cognitive authority. The traditional forms of cognitive authority that many have recently rejected align closely with corresponding forms of political authority. The entrenched Washington elite that Donald Trump promised to overturn is marked as much by its fondness for experts and its supposedly close alliance with the mainstream media as by its interference from above in ordinary people’s lives. Cognitive authority is easier to throw off, however, than political authority. As we learn from Weber, it is certainly possible for one group to “impose” an authority upon another, which dissents in its assessment of the authority’s legitimacy but must nonetheless submit.<sup>53</sup> In this case, the authority remains valid in the sense that it continues to operate as an authority, even though the different groups hold different views. In the case of cognitive authority, we have greater agency over which forms of authority we allow to influence our thinking. Moreover, as the Trump campaign and later presidency consistently defied political correctness, attacked the mainstream media, and presented inaccurate information as



truth, it became increasingly acceptable not just to think in ways that resisted the so-called elites but also to give voice to that thinking.

Second, people do not recognize cognitive authorities merely on the basis of their likely accuracy or reliability. Wilson posits two bases for granting authority that speak far more to the importance of emotion and rhetoric. One he equates to Weber's charismatic authority: "The direct impression of the individual personality may be enough" to establish cognitive authority.<sup>54</sup> Trump, who earned the trust of many voters even when they knew he was not telling the truth, likely earned his following at least in part through charisma. The other basis is:

Authority can be justified simply on the ground that one finds the views of an individual intrinsically plausible, convincing, or persuasive. If a source repeatedly tells me things that I find illuminating and that ring true, I may come to expect more of the same from him, to count on him, refer others to him, quote him to others. He will have acquired cognitive authority over me.<sup>55</sup>

When the *Christian Science Monitor* interviewed readers of fake news in December 2016 it found that while "some fans insist on the sites' integrity . . . others say the facts don't really matter." For these readers, "lived perception displaces accuracy."<sup>56</sup> Between one source that is accurate and reliable and another that seems "intrinsically plausible, convincing, or persuasive" and provides information that a person "find[s] illuminating and that ring[s] true," the latter—the source that appeals to emotion and, in the *Monitor's* words, "lived perception"—will often become the cognitive authority.

How prepared is the authority frame of the Framework to address the present political situation? One underlying assumption in the frame is that authority and expertise are necessarily tied to each other. We see this in the passage "Novice learners come to respect the expertise that authority represents."<sup>57</sup> Authority represents expertise; in other words, expertise is part of what grants a given source of information its authority. To say that authority represents expertise is to suggest that, at least to some extent, cognitive authority inheres in the person or source of information that has it. But in fact, as we have seen, authority actually exists in a social relationship wherein at least one other person recognizes that authority as legitimate. Expertise is certainly one basis on which one might recognize cognitive authority, but it is not the only one; nor does it guarantee that an expert will be recognized as an authority. The frame suggests, however, that expertise automatically grants a degree of authority. Here we find a fundamental contradiction within the frame's definition of authority, a contradiction that makes possible such opposing critiques. Authority cannot be "constructed and contextual," or understood in the Wilsonian sense of being a "type of influence recognized or exerted within a community,"<sup>58</sup> and also have inherent qualities—yet that is exactly what the frame says. The frame posits a definition of authority on which it does not entirely follow through.

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Other potential “indicators of authority” that the frame explicitly mentions include “type of publication or author credentials” as examples of how “novice learners” might identify authorities and “schools of thought or discipline-specific paradigms” as examples of how “experts” might recognize authority.<sup>59</sup> Notably, the frame uses the term “indicators of authority”; *indicator* implies, again, something that is a characteristic of the authority itself. As we see from both Wilson and Weber, what makes an authority function as such is, in fact, that others recognize it as an authority. Yet the frame makes little mention of what happens in the minds of the learners themselves. Charisma, emotion, and inherent plausibility are nowhere to be found in the authority frame. One of the dispositions states that learners will evaluate content “with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview,” while another states that they will “develop and maintain an open mind when encountering varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives,”<sup>60</sup> but these are the only such gestures.

As some critics have already observed, the frame operates in this way because it, like the Framework as a whole, is about inducting learners into academic culture. The authority frame is not about the ways in which learners come to recognize legitimate cognitive authorities. Instead, it is interested in learners’ self-orientation to existing forms of cognitive authority, forms that have various levels of legitimacy already established in the academic community. References to “indicators of authority” such as “author credentials . . . schools of thought or discipline-specific paradigms,” as well as the observation that “novice learners come to respect the expertise that authority represents,” suggest as much. Likewise, when learners come to question authority, it is with respect to that same ongoing self-orientation. Although “novice learners . . . respect the expertise that authority represents,” they should nonetheless remain “skeptical of the systems that have elevated that authority and the information created by it.” According to the third knowledge practice, learners will “understand that many disciplines have acknowledged authorities . . . and yet . . . some scholars would challenge the authority of those sources.”<sup>61</sup> The assumption these examples share is that learners’ understanding and acknowledgment (legitimation? validation?) of established forms of cognitive authority precede their recognition and questioning of the underlying power structures.

This assumption is at the root of objections to the Framework from the perspective of critical information literacy. As Beilin puts it, “The specific type of information literacy advocated by the Framework is one which accepts the existence of a particular regime of knowledge, and demands that we as librarians focus our energies on making students and faculty competent citizens of that regime, even if dynamic, critical, and progressive ones.”<sup>62</sup> As even critics observe, insofar as the Framework encourages learners to question or resist established authorities, it does so in a way that recognizes concerns related to social justice. The most noteworthy example from the authority frame is its exhortation that learners will “acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others’ worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations,”<sup>63</sup> a statement that acknowledges the effect of power structures on marginalized communities.

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The problem is that the post-facts worldview—which involves radical questioning of established forms of cognitive authority—has, for the most part, little to do with the aims of critical information literacy, let alone social justice. Certainly, post-facts tendencies appear across the political spectrum. Much attention has been paid to liberal “anti-vaxxers,” for example, and a 2015 Pew survey found that one in five self-identified Democrats believes vaccination should not be mandatory.<sup>64</sup> Some supporters of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary argued that mainstream media, as part of the country’s “ruling class,” were biased against him and his economic agenda,<sup>65</sup> although such accusations did not extend to wholesale rejection of the mainstream media as a source of information about current events. But the center of the present post-facts culture is undeniably Donald Trump, who both personifies and legitimizes such tendencies. Trumpist nationalism relies on post-facts logic whereby the previous administration was lenient toward undocumented immigrants (contrary to government statistics), Islamist terrorism is pervasive (contrary to academic studies), and any journalism that questions Trump is “fake news.” The policies and methods of governing that result are inspiring fierce opposition from social justice advocates and many others.

Put simply, then, librarianship’s guiding document on authority in information literacy does not prepare us to teach in a post-facts United States. The academic library profession faces a political situation wherein many citizens do not recognize various indicators of authority that the frame takes for granted and fundamentally distrust traditional forms of cognitive authority. This is not the sort of resistance championed by critics who argue that, in upholding traditional academic power structures and the values on which those structures are premised, the Framework undercuts its own commitment

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to social justice. Rather, this is a resistance that rejects a priori the cognitive authority of such sources as academics, government organizations, and the mainstream media. The resisters’ rejection of these sources is justified, in their view, by the fact that the sources appear biased against Trump and his supporters and sometimes even toward social justice itself. But instead of taking such possibilities into account, the authority frame of the Framework assumes that certain indicators of authority inhere in sources of information. It assumes that learners will be gradually initiated into academic culture, thereby coming to recognize traditional forms of academic authority. And it assumes that learners’ questioning and resistance of authority will be directed at the ways information power structures silence less-powerful voices. In doing all these things, it fails to provide librarians the guidance necessary to teach about questions of authority after the 2016 election.



## Conclusion

What are academic librarians who teach information literacy to do? Simply rededicating ourselves to critical source evaluation is an insufficient response to a post-facts era, because doing so assumes that learners will accept indicators of authority that may not correspond to their own bases for recognizing legitimate cognitive authorities. Authority never inheres in a source. Problematically, though, the Framework both suggests that authority can be inherent and assumes learners' initiation into academic culture—in other words, it fails to provide an answer.

Solutions must come from elsewhere, and they will need to be creative. I intend to prepare another article, for later publication, that addresses potential remedies, and I hope others in the academic library profession will consider the problem as well. The remedies might include the following:

*Librarians must give more attention to the role emotion plays in reasoning and decision-making.* Much teaching of source evaluation revolves around the who, what, when, where, why, and how: factors such as the credentials of the author, purpose and reputation of the publisher, date of publication, strengths and failures of the peer-review process, and so on. Yet, such factors play only a partial role in determining which sources of information a person will most likely trust. Information literacy instruction must develop a repertoire of methods for teaching source evaluation that take into account the full complexity of legitimate cognitive authority. Some library scholarship already considers the relationship between students' likelihood to trust a source, or recognize it as a cognitive authority, and their personal beliefs or epistemology, and such considerations should continue.

*Librarians must explore methods of teaching about the relationship between evidence and its interpretation.* In the post-facts climate, individuals on either side of a debate often cannot, or will not, agree on the evidence itself, be that evidence demographic data, data from a scientific study, or an official document (such as a birth certificate). Certainly, students must learn to critically interrogate methods of gathering and presenting evidence. But it

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**The very presence of a post-facts mind-set in American culture is one sign among many that libraries must redouble both their efforts toward inclusivity and support for underrepresented students, and their commitment to making social justice a critical component of information literacy instruction.**

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is equally important for them to recognize when the root cause of a disagreement is—or ought to be—not the evidence itself but rather the competing perspectives, worldviews, or “frames” applied to its interpretation. The skills necessary for

this recognition go beyond information literacy into the realms of critical reading and various disciplinary practices, yet librarians can and should play a role.

*Librarians must continue strengthening our commitment to social justice and its relationship to information literacy.* Post-facts politics are often contrary, and even openly hostile, to the aims and values of social justice, a movement that many librarians support. How do we



champion social justice in a way that also grasps the “teachable moment” with students who may be inclined to post-facts thinking? I have no clear answer at this writing, but I know we must somehow do both. The very presence of a post-facts mind-set in American culture is one sign among many that libraries must redouble both their efforts toward inclusivity and support for underrepresented students, and their commitment to making social justice a critical component of information literacy instruction. Academic libraries and higher education as a whole have a significant distance yet to travel to reach equity.

My critiques of the Framework are not a call to abandon either it or the specific frame “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual,” but rather to recognize their limitations and what those mean for the work of academic librarians. As a whole, the Framework provides a much-needed and invaluable improvement over the previous “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,” which were mechanistic and lacking in the complexity necessary to approach information with a critical mind-set. The Framework makes important strides in recognizing the relationship between information and power and thus opens up possibilities, in ways the Standards did not, for librarians to teach with an orientation toward social justice—although I acknowledge, as well, the ways in which it undercuts its own purported goals. My college library, excited about the recent adoption of the Framework, has already drawn on its vision to advance conversations with faculty, craft sophisticated program outcomes, and develop our own commitment to social justice. But critically examining such a document, which encodes the values of a profession, makes the invisible visible and prevents our becoming enclosed within self-imposed limits.

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