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The Framing of Authority in the ACRL Framework on Information Literacy: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Truth, Authority, Expertise and Belief.

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Abstract**Purpose**

This paper engages multi-disciplinary perspectives on truth, authority, expertise and belief to unpack and better understand the underlying epistemology and implications of the ACRL frame “authority is constructed and contextual”.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Following an overview of the issues confronting us in a “post-truth world”, the paper reviews critiques of the ACRL frame “authority is constructed and contextual” and examines the related concepts of truth, authority, expertise and belief from multi-disciplinary perspectives.

Findings

While the frame acknowledges the limitations and biases of current scholarly publishing and implicitly supports social justice, it runs the danger of promoting relativism and is ambiguous regarding the relationships between expertise and authority. The critical concepts of truth and belief are conspicuously absent. Engaging a critical discussion and understanding of these concepts is a valuable contribution to information literacy.

Originality/Value

This paper offers an important and accessible analysis of the frame “authority is constructed and contextual” and its underlying concepts. It reviews but also moves beyond the library literature to include multi-disciplinary perspectives, and will require the engagement of the wider library community. In particular, the discussion of the construction of belief and the difference between judgments of fact and judgments of value offers important additions to the library literature.

Keywords

Information literacy, authority, truth, expertise, belief, post-truth

Paper Type: Viewpoint

Introduction

It is often claimed that we live in a “post-truth era,” where emotional appeal outweighs objective searching for the truth (e.g., Cooke, 2017; Ferretti, 2023; Keyes, 2004). Accepting what appeals to us emotionally rather than assessing information intelligently and reflectively leaves us prone to the “erroneous beliefs” that Jesuit theologian and philosopher Bernard Lonergan considers the greatest evil afflicting humankind (1992, p. 709). This problem is compounded by a tendency to selectively attune to and accept information that resonates with our personal beliefs, a pattern which Silverman (1992) termed “confirmation bias”. Horowitz (2019) notes that a type of group confirmation bias may cause social scientists to “gravitate (consciously or otherwise) toward like-minded scholars, forming interpretive groups that tend to use the same methods and interpret evidence in kindred ways”.

Sharot (2017) defines confirmation bias as “seeking out and interpreting data in a way that strengthens or pre-established opinions” (p. 22). She calls it “one of the strongest biases humans hold” noting that “confronting people with information that contradicts their opinion can cause them to come up with new counterarguments that further strengthen their original view” (p. 17). The explosion of unfiltered information on the internet and via social media has allowed the proliferation and wide dissemination of unverified, sensationalized, and often conflicting information, which may also encourage people to retreat further into their entrenched beliefs (Badke, 2017). As White (2022) observes, “exposing ourselves to information that potentially shatters our worldview can cause cognitive dissonance, and many will go to great lengths to avoid this discomforting experience” (p. 369).

Mackey (2019) observes that social media has created “an editorial vacuum with confusing notions of expertise [without] collective agreements about what is reality or expertise”

(p. 6). There is also the potential for social media to create “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles” that shape and restrict the user’s encounter to like-minded opinions through algorithms designed to personalize information and target advertising, thus reinforcing the effect of confirmation bias (Bakir and McStay, 2018; Pariser, 2012). The power and influence of such practices may be overstated (see Dahlgren, 2021 for a recent critique), but there are clearly limitations and biases that shape the information we receive and how we perceive it. However, while the unregulated internet and social media undoubtedly contribute to our erroneous beliefs, Bruns (2019) observes that “we cannot absolve ourselves from the mess we are in simply by blaming technology” (p. 7), concluding that “the most important filter remains in our heads, not our networks” (p. 121). In other words, the fundamental issue is not the over-abundance of information and a lack of regulation, or manipulation by unscrupulous parties, but how we choose to critically engage with information, the questions that we ask, and our willingness to confront and change our opinions and beliefs after reasonable reflection and critical judgment.

Librarians typically advocate for information literacy as the best defense against misinformation, disinformation, and confirmation bias (e.g., Bailey and Hsieh-Yee, 2020; Revez and Corujo, 2021). In addition to teaching hands-on research skills, librarians stress the importance of critically evaluating sources. However, the growth of AI applications such as ChatGPT make evaluating information sources particularly challenging given the frequent lack of references, exclusion of scholarly articles inaccessible behind paywalls, lack of currency, and the prevalence of fake references (“hallucinations”). A nuanced analysis of information literacy that addresses the epistemology and cognitional processes involved in evaluating truth claims, authority, expertise, and belief is clearly needed. This paper explores these concepts from various disciplinary perspectives, with the aim of clarifying the Frame “*Authority is Constructed and*

Contextual” in the *Association of College and Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy* (ACRL, 2015, hereafter referred to as the Framework). When engaging such weighty concepts, which have profound implications not only for information literacy but for our worldviews and actions, it is necessary to expand our focus beyond the library literature.

Information literacy and the ACRL Framework

Zurkowski (1974) defines information literacy as “being able to find what is known or knowable on any subject” (p. 23). This seems an impossible goal, even for the pre-internet era. However, his observations that “information is not knowledge; it is concepts or ideas which enter a person’s field of perception, are evaluated and assimilated, reinforcing or changing the individual’s concept of reality and/or ability to act” (p. 4) and that “we experience an overabundance of information whenever available information exceeds our capacity to evaluate it” (p. 4) remain highly relevant today. Definitions of information literacy historically focused on sets of skills like those set forth in ACRL’s Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (see Sample, 2020 for a review). By contrast, the Framework is “based on a cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation, rather than on a set of standards or learning outcomes, or any prescriptive enumeration of skills” (ACRL, 2015, p. 7; see Battista *et al.*, 2015; Bombaro, 2016; Filbert and Ryan, 2016; Sokkar Harker, 2016-17; Wilkinson, 2016a for history and critiques of the Framework’s development and implementation). The Framework includes six “Frames” intended to provide guidelines for developing information literacy. It has been described as “an outline ... designed to help librarians focus their teaching on essential information characteristics [and] provide theoretical underpinnings for the sensemaking involved in information literacy (Kempa, 2016, p. 240).

The Framework has been widely adopted by librarians, but initially received mixed and sometimes contentious reviews (Jarson and Hamelers, 2022). Battista *et al.* (2015) criticize that while it recognizes that “information emerges from varied contexts that reflect uneven distributions of power, privilege, and authority, it is missing a cogent statement that connects information literacy to social justice” (112-113). Bombaro (2016) calls it elitist ... divisive and counterintuitive (p. 553). Seale (2016) described it as “conflicted, internally contradictory, and ambivalent ... specifically in its understanding of power relations and standards,” including its own position regarding authority (p. 82). Because it challenges traditional concepts of authority and implicitly addresses the lack of diversity in scholarly publishing, the first frame “authority is constructed and contextual”, hereafter referred to as the Frame, has drawn particular attention and “heated debate within the field” (Saunders and Budd, 2020, p. 3).

Frame #1: Authority Is Constructed and Contextual

“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, 2015, p. 12).

The Frame acknowledges the need to “determine the validity of information created by different authorities and to acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others’ worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations” (ACRL, 2015, 12). The “dispositions” associated with this Frame suggest that “Learners who are developing their information literate abilities ... motivate themselves to find authoritative sources, recognizing that authority may be conferred or manifested in unexpected

ways” and “question traditional notions of granting authority and recognize the value of diverse ideas and worldviews” (p. 13).

The Frame implicitly supports the principles of critical information literacy, which involves “developing a critical consciousness about information, learning to ask questions about the library’s (and the academy’s) role in structuring and presenting a single, knowable reality” (Elmborg 2006, p. 198). While many librarians would likely agree that there should be some social justice component to library instruction (Saunders, 2017), critical information literacy goes further in aiming “to understand how libraries participate in systems of oppression and find ways for librarians and students to act upon these systems ... daring to imagine education as a site for generating social change” (Tewell, 2018, p. 11). Cuevas-Cerveró *et al.* (2023) refer to critical information literacy as “information activism ... the strategic use of information and technology to create and disseminate messages that seek to promote changes in society that benefit the community” (p. 4). Sokkar Harker (2016-2017) asserts that “critical information literacy is inseparable from social justice” (p. 33), and that students should be made aware of the structural inequalities and information barriers facing those outside the traditional academy, especially marginalized groups. Peer-reviewed articles are often considered the most reliable sources in academia, but journal submission requirements, paywalls restricting access, and the dominance of mainstream editors (typically white males) may exclude important minority opinions. Roh (2016) observes that the lack of diversity in both authors and editors reinforces a “feedback loop in scholarship that privileges and publishes the majority voice” (p. 82).

An invitation to entertain diverse perspectives should surely resonate with librarians. However, encouraging students to disregard the limits of traditional scholarly publishing raises the issue of who to believe among a throng of voices and opinions. Describing early critics of the

Frame, Saunders and Budd (2020) cite numerous comments on the theme that “all types of authority are equally valid and that anyone can be an authority on any topic” (p. 3). Lane Wilkinson writes extensively on the Framework, especially the authority frame, in his blog “Sense and Reference.” His analysis of an early draft criticizes the lack of clarity regarding authority, noting it “leaves a lot unexplained” (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 6). He gives the revised version of the frame a “final grade” of A-, but criticizes the “wishy washy” language and failure to emphasize that “some forms of authority are better than others” (Wilkinson, 2016*b*, p. 4). Stronger criticism comes from Nathan Rinne, who asserts that the Framework is based on social constructivism, pragmatism and relativism (Rinne, 2016, 2017*a*). He asks whether it “is indifferent to the matter of truth – or even that truth is really only about the usefulness and expediency of ideas” (Rinne, 2016, p. 209). Stating that “authority is constructed and contextual” can create an impression that “quests to be true, tell the truth and seek what is really true ... are questionable forays at best and naïve and unwelcome at worst” (Rinne, 2017*a*, p. 64). This raises the thorny question of what we mean by “truth,” and its relationship to authority, expertise, and belief.

The Question of Truth

Rinne (2016, 2017*a*) contends that the frame “authority is constructed and contextual” ignores the premise that research is not only a quest for knowledge but a quest for the truth, and that truth and authority are inextricably connected. He cites correspondence with an author of the Framework stating that “authority and truth ... particularly notions of ‘objective truth’ – are not linked together in the Framework (Rinne, 2017*a*, p. 58). Rinne debates this issue with William Badke (Rinne, 2017*b*), who suggests that while he personally believes in truth, seeking it is “a lofty goal” on which “we will never find complete consensus” and a more realistic goal is “reasonable

confidence based on careful methodology and good evidence” (Badke, 2018, p. 5-6). However, they agree on the dangers of “radical postmodernism,” noting that “if everything is seen as subjective and everyone’s perspective is equally valid, there will be neither consensus nor truth, and knowledge will be driven by speculation and paranoia” (Badke, 2018, p. 6).

It is often claimed that what we believe to be true depends on our perspective or “world view,” which is influenced by our social situation, prior experience, existing beliefs, and theories about the world. In his classic book *Second-hand knowledge: an inquiry into cognitive authority*, Patrick Wilson (1983) notes that our “concepts and theories constitute a sort of lens through which we look at the world” (p. 6). He warns that attempting to integrate the views from these many lenses to reveal the larger truth will give an inaccurate and distorted picture of the world, which can lead to mistakes of judgment. For example, when multiple witnesses describe a single event, each often gives details that are incompatible with the testimony of others, so compiling them will only result in confusion – the different “lenses” simply do not cohere into a whole that represents reality. Wilson concludes that the only way to overcome such mistakes is “by giving up the theories and concepts. We must discard the faulty lenses for better ones” (p. 7).

Wilson’s metaphor of “lenses” evokes Bernard Lonergan’s “horizons ... that limit and distort our views of the world and prevent us from making good judgments regarding the truth” (Lonergan, 1992, p. 662). Lonergan’s “horizons” comprise not only our perspective, but “the total field of what one is concerned with” (Lonergan, 2001, 298). Bova *et al.*, (2018) similarly note that “an individual’s horizon includes the scope of his or her current knowledge, range of interests, and the questions he or she considers worthwhile and answerable” (p. 80). As Lonergan observes, “people will see what they want to see, what can fit within their horizon, and they will omit the rest” (Lonergan 2001, p. 304).

Lynch (1998) acknowledges the existence of different worldviews or “schemas,” which he terms “metaphysical pluralism,” but he adds that:

“the pluralist, then, needn't admit that every possible worldview or conceptual scheme is as good as every other. There are viable and nonviable worldviews. A viable worldview hangs together, is free from massive internal inconsistency, fits the empirical data, is mostly truthful, and so on. A nonviable worldview is fragmented and inconsistent, ignores the data, and is more often mistaken than not” (p. 150).

Acknowledging different worldviews is not to suggest that everything is relative, and that truth does not exist or is not discoverable, but rather that careful judgment about truth claims is essential. Ferretti (2023) notes that judgments about truth require sufficient evidence to verify them, and as new evidence emerges, claims about truth may be revised. When sufficient evidence is lacking, “we strive to establish the reasonableness ... of a truth claim ... by applying methodological principles that are consistent with epistemic values such as coherence, simplicity, relevance, and justification” (p. 309). He concludes with the myriad of evils that follow “wanton disregard for the truth,” stressing the need for “an education that encourages inquiry in pursuit of truth” (320) and “promotes the epistemic values, ethical virtues, expertise and the advanced literacy skills needed for democratic deliberation and inquiry” (p. 322).

Kuehn (2017) contends that the Rinne-Badke debate about truth in the context of the Frame “authority is constructed and contextual” is a “pseudo problem” (p. 39) and that the Frame does not mean “authority is *merely* constructed and contextual” or “authority is *always* dependent on social constructions and contexts” (p. 41). Kuehn’s interpretation is that “authorities are reliable sources of testimony [about research questions] rather than the absolute truth” (p. 42), and that authority as referred to in the Frame means “something that identifies

persons or texts as privileged mediators of knowledge about truth” (p. 43). While this neatly dodges the question of truth, it leads inexorably to the question of what we mean by authority.

The Question of Authority

Debates regarding the nature and scope of authority date to at least the early modern (post-medieval) period (e.g., Lanuza-Navarro, 2017). Kuehn (2017) explains that most philosophers divide authority into two types: political authority (executive or behavioral authority) and epistemic authority (non-executive authority or authority over belief) (p. 41). The Frame refers to “societal position (e.g., public office or title)” as a form of authority (ACRL, 2015, p. 12), but its focus is Kuehn’s concept of epistemic authority – the authority that shapes our beliefs and truth judgments. Wilson (1983) calls this “cognitive authority,” the term now generally used in the social sciences. Wilson observes that “we mostly depend on others for ideas, as well as for information from other social perspectives ... much of what we think about the world is what we have second hand from others” (p. 10). He stresses that cognitive authority is limited to specific “spheres” or professional domains. In academia, this typically means a particular discipline or subject area, “established through extensive processes of examination and peer review” (Farrow and Moe, 2019, p. 275). One might expect that any cognitive authority would be an expert in her or his subject. However, Wilson makes the critical point that cognitive authority does not always depend on expertise, but on perceived credibility and plausibility. He later defines cognitive authority simply as “authority based on claims to special knowledge,” noting that “cognitive authority is a matter of social perception and recognition” and that who is recognized as an authority can change over time and circumstance” (Wilson, 1991, p. 259; see also McKenzie, 2003). It is not what you really know but what others think you know that gives you authority; “you get cognitive authority by getting others to think you know things” (Wilson,

1991, p. 260). This reflects the idea of authority based on rhetoric rather than truth, such that “authority rests with those who can persuade others of their opinion” (Saunders and Budd, 2020, p. 4).

Lonergan (2017) emphasizes the cooperative nature of authority, noting that “authority belongs to the community that has a common field of experience, common and complementary ways of understanding common judgments and common aims” (p. 5). However, he adds the important caution that recognized authorities can be inauthentic or illegitimate (p. 6). As Badke (2017) so eloquently states: “The most pressing enemy at the gates today is conjecture and speculation masquerading as authority” (p. 59). Thus, the Frame serves as a warning about *uncritical* acceptance of authority. The obvious question arising is, “How do we determine who has authority, who or what can be believed? (Badke, 2015, p. 195).

The Question of Expertise

Badke (2015) observes that “the authority embodied in any piece of information relies to a large extent upon the expertise of its author” (p. 200). The Frame does not define expertise or distinguish between expertise and authority, but the statements “information resources reflect their creators’ expertise and credibility,” “the expertise that authority represents” and (learners) “define different types of authority, such as subject expertise” (ACRL, 2015, p. 12) imply that expertise should be a criterion in judging authority. Wilson (1983) notes that although authority and expertise are closely related, they are not interchangeable (p. 26). One may have expertise but no authority and, unfortunately, one may have authority without expertise. So, what exactly *is* expertise, and how is it determined?

In his classic book on expertise, Abbott (1988) observes that the growth of specialization and professionalization in industrialized countries is “how societies structure expertise” by assigning expertise to specific domains that control professional knowledge (p. 323). Badke notes that “expertise involves the ability to demonstrate a mastery of subject matter and to operationalize that subject matter in order to demonstrate a superior grasp of problems and solutions in a particular field” (Badke 2015, p. 200). Mehlenbacher (2022) elaborates that “expertise is the enactment of knowledge and skills, through practical judgment and practical wisdom founded on integrated experience and, critically, through an ethical framework relational to one’s audience” (p. 23). An issue that arises here is the relationship between expertise and expert, which are often conflated in the literature. Clearly there are degrees of expertise, and one may have considerable expertise without being considered an expert. Additionally, some experts are seen to have more knowledge than others, and “who is recognized as an expert can change over time” (Farrow and Moe, 2019, p. 276).

Chi *et al.*, (1988) describe seven key characteristics of experts: they excel mainly in their own domain, perceive large meaningful patterns, quickly solve problems with few errors, have superior short and long-term memories, see problems at a deep level, spend time analyzing a problem qualitatively, and have strong self-monitoring skills (pp. xvii-xx). They observe that the “tantamount consideration is that experts make better – more accurate – judgements than untrained novices” (p. 210). Goldman (2001) distinguishes between experts who are accomplished at certain skills, and “cognitive or intellectual experts: people who have (or claim to have) a superior quantity or level of knowledge in some domain,” (p. 91), adding that “to qualify as a cognitive expert, a person must possess a substantial body of truths in the target domain (p. 91). Lynch (2007) notes deterioration of the classical view that experts “achieve their

authority through good works ... are (relatively) disinterested, and can be trusted to deliver the facts without bias or distortion” (p. 18), but stresses that truthfulness must remain an important criterion of expertise. If we agree that “experts” aim to discover and disseminate the truth, it follows that “expertise” is also linked with the search for truth.

The literature is replete with references to a decline in the recognition of expertise (e.g., Badke, 2015; Caudill, 2022, 2023; Chester, 2022; Collins and Evans, 2007; Eyal, 2019, 2022; Farrow and Moe, 2019; Lynch, 2007; Nichols, 2019; Reed and Reed, 2022). An entire issue of *Teaching in Higher Education* addresses issues with “the post-truth error”, especially the diminishing value of expertise in higher education (Harrison and Luckett, 2019). Lynch (2007) traces growing “cynicism and skepticism” about expertise to “the social distribution of knowledge in late-modern societies” (p. 19), notably the ambiguous relationship between scientific “experts” whose opinions are sought, and the ultimate decision makers (courts, politicians, governments, etc.) who interpret and act on them. This has fostered suspicion (“vulgar skepticism”) that “experts” are not disinterested authorities searching for truth but have “vested political or economic interests” (p. 21). Lynch suggests that challenges to the classical view of experts as infallible and unbiased (and science as unified and objective) have contributed to a broader “academic” skepticism, which questions the authority of experts in general. Badke (2015) similarly observes that “the politicization of expertise and authority to meet utilitarian goals is ... a path to perverting the purposes of genuine scholarship, thus casting the whole notion of academic authority into disarray” (p. 194).

Caudill (2023) focuses on public distrust of established science but argues that there is “an ideological or quasi-religious orientation to the crisis of expertise” (p. 9), which extends well beyond the sciences and marks deep divisions in society and a lack of trust in its institutions and

traditional authorities. Reed and Reed (2022) attribute the “crisis in expert authority” to the rise of neoliberalism and popularism (p. 3). Eyal (2022) notes that distrust is an “engine” in “the crisis of expertise,” exacerbated by the decline of traditional gatekeepers in journalism and the rise of social media influencers and celebrities as purveyors of information (p. 123). Further issues include conflicting opinions among “experts,” which can be difficult or impractical for laypersons to evaluate (e.g., Pierson, 1994; Goldman, 2001), and determining the boundaries of expertise.

Most definitions of expertise note that it is confined to specific domains, although Collins and Evans (2007) suggest that “there are kinds of expertise that are not captured by traditional modes of accreditation, including “lay experts” or “experience-based experts” (p. 142). Determining the boundaries of expertise becomes especially problematic in complex situations requiring input from a variety of experts, such as the Covid 19 pandemic. As Pilkington *et al.*, (2021) note, “understanding who *are* the proper experts is not always easy” (p. 187). However, they stress that educators must engage these challenges because “institutions of higher education create and foster expertise and so it is necessary that they not only defer to experts, but that they defer to the proper experts” (p. 187).

Expertise and authority are core “concepts in formal educational systems” (Farrow and Moe, 2019, p. 275), and the “crisis of expertise” has critical implications for higher education and information literacy. The ready availability of information via the internet and social media appears to make knowledge “a cheap commodity” and librarians redundant ... “What we don’t know, we can look up. Who needs a knowledge expert?” (Badke, 2015, p. 191). Lynch’s (2007) “academic skepticism” (p. 21) fosters suspicion of scholarly publishing and the peer-review process, reinforced by critical librarianship and its emphasis on structural inequities in the

production of and access to traditional scholarly literature. In addition, the growing corporatization of higher education, with its marketplace attitude to knowledge as a commodity and students as consumers, adds to the impression that expertise is an outdated, elitist concept. But without a clear understanding of expertise and its relevance to authority, how do we judge who or what to believe?

The Question of Belief

Belief has been studied and discussed in a broad range of disciplines and from many perspectives. “*The Cognitive Science of Belief*” includes contributions by scholars from psychology, decision science, communication and media studies, political science, business and economics, religion, philosophy, anthropology, neuroscience, and physics. In their introduction, Sommer *et al.* (2023) remark that “beliefs play a central role in our lives: they lie at the heart of what makes us human, they shape the organizing and functioning of our minds, they define the boundaries of our culture, and they guide our motivation and behavior” (p. 1). However, they note that there is no consensus definition of belief even among philosophers, and there are divergent views regarding the complex mechanisms and functions of belief. Fully engaging these debates is beyond the scope of this paper, but even the narrower question of how belief is related to expertise and authority invites many disciplinary perspectives.

Wilkins (2021) distinguishes between questions of understanding, where we determine answers for ourselves, and questions of belief. He describes belief as “assent to authority,” where we trust the word of others in matters that we cannot properly understand for ourselves. Belief thus involves asking “whether someone can and ought to be trusted” (p. 251); in other words, “*who* do we believe”? Psychologists focus more on how we judge the truthfulness of information – “how do we know *what* to believe?” (Brashier and Marsh, 2020, p. 500, italics

added). They describe various factors that influence our judgment, including a tendency to assume that information is true, the ease of processing information, and familiarity or consistency with prior knowledge or opinion (fluency) They also note that repetition reinforces a prior belief that information is true, so that “illusory truth persists over time” (p. 503). Research by Riesthuis and Woods (2023) confirms that repeated statements are more likely to be perceived as truthful (believed) than new statements, whether they are true or not. However, instructing study participants to assess statements as either fact or opinion (i.e., to critically reflect on what they read) reduced or reversed this effect.

Research in communication and journalism focuses on message credibility, defined as “an individual’s judgement of the veracity of the content of the communication” (Appelman and Sundar, 2015, p. 63). This includes judging the credibility of the source (who to believe), the message (what to believe) and the medium (how the information is delivered). Their study participants perceived credible messages as “accurate, authentic, and believable,” and credible sources as “authoritative, reliable, reputable, and trustworthy” (pp. 73-74). Hinsley *et al.*, (2022) found similar cues of “believability, authenticity, trustworthiness, reliability, and objectivity” (p. 61) in assessing Covid-19 information. Focusing on social media, Jahng and Littau (2016) report that journalists who engage with their audiences and are “highly interactive” are perceived as more credible than those who are less interactive, although “both expertise and trustworthiness are measures of source credibility” (p. 53). Tandoc *et al.* (2018) propose that individuals also rely on “their own tacit sense of authenticity” based on their “experience, knowledge, and intuition” (p. 2753). They may cross-check information with friends, institutional or other news sources, but can still perceive false news as credible if it is frequently repeated by different sources. Social media, where “popularity, likes, and virality become markers of value” (Tandoc

et al., 2018, p. 2758), makes it easy for erroneous beliefs to be reinforced through social recognition (see also Farrow and Moe, 2019).

Wilkinson (2015) notes a growing trend for librarians to adopt a social constructionist view that “every belief ... is the byproduct of the social and cultural forces that have shaped our mind,” and a move away from the realist or positivist search for “absolute truth” (p. 22; see Rinne, 2017*a* for a discussion of Wilkinson’s chapter). The positivist assumes that what we believe corresponds to some discoverable truth about the world - judged empirically and/or deduced through reason, while the social constructionist sees the truth as “a matter of social acceptance” (Wilkinson, 2015, p. 26), which may differ among groups or research communities (see McKenzie, 2003 for a constructionist view of cognitive authority). Wilkinson contends that social constructionism impedes new learning by only validating existing beliefs, and risks “disenfranchising oppressed and minority voices” by allowing powerful entrenched beliefs (even if false) to be placed “beyond criticism” (2015, p. 28). This is a critical point because the Framework, especially the authority frame, leans toward social constructivism to *engage* oppressed and minority voices, my italics.

Wilkinson (2015) suggests the compromise of “social epistemology,” which he describes as “seeking true or accurate information ... true beliefs, justified beliefs”, while acknowledging the social constructivist position that most of what we believe is based on “social or cultural interactions,” and “the testimony of others” (p. 29). However, this again raises the problem of how to judge the testimony of others. One approach is to evaluate the reliability of the information provider over time and/or in comparison to other trusted sources, but few have the time or expertise to conduct such intensive investigation (see Goldman, 2001, on the challenges for novices attempting to evaluate expert testimony). The alternative is to trust the source’s

creditability unless there are obvious reasons – “red flags” – to believe the source is untrustworthy (Wilkinson, 2015, p. 31). This resonates with the psychological premise that we tend to believe that what we are told is the truth unless we discover evidence to the contrary (Brashier and Marsh, 2020), and the “acceptance principle” to “accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible unless there are strong reasons not to do so” (Burge 1993, p. 467).

Lonergan also emphasizes that much of what we believe rests on the testimony of others rather than on what he terms “immanently generated knowledge” based on our own experience, understanding, and judgment. He cautions that ‘known to be true’ and ‘believed to be true’ are quite distinct, and “one will be inviting fallacy if one ignores the distinction” (Lonergan 1992, p. 739). For Lonergan, knowledge is “a collaboration that involves belief, truthfulness, accuracy, and immanently generated knowledge” (p. 741). Yet we often believe that we know something when our “knowledge” rests entirely on belief in what others have said. As Levy (2021) observes, “we defer to others so ubiquitously and so routinely we fail to notice when it occurs” (pp. 59-60). Lonergan describes the “normative” process of believing as deliberate and rational, but as Fitzpatrick (2005) warns, “it is a norm that that can be all too easily broken” (p. 52).

Lonergan also makes the important distinction that evaluating information is a judgment about *facts*, while deciding whether to trust the source of the information is a judgment of *value*, although the latter could also have an empirical (factual) component in terms of judging the accuracy and consistency of the source’s previous claims. The final step of deciding to believe (or not) is also a judgment of value – a value of its own sake but also a pragmatic decision “to profit by a human collaboration in the pursuit of truth” Lonergan 1992, (p. 731). Levy (2021) suggests that we may “accept bizarre conspiracy theories and rumors because they have no

practical consequences for our behavior” (p. 9), because we do not want to admit ignorance, or do not bother judging truth for ourselves and “outsource” judgment to others (p. 65). In other words, acquiescing in a proposition that holds no value for us does not reflect “true” belief. For Lonergan, true belief is based on something that we know to be true through our own experience, careful evaluation of another’s truth claims, or a collaboration between the two. However, the concept of valuing truth is critical to both Levy and Lonergan, and resonates with Rinne’s (2017a) assertion that library patrons “want to acquire knowledge, true beliefs, justified beliefs, understanding, etc.” (p. 55).

Praxis: Integration and Practical Ways Forward

The question of what we value leads back to the ACRL Frame “authority is constructed and contextual.” If we set a high value on including a diversity of opinions and perspectives and question the value of traditional authority, then we will applaud the Frame’s attempt to be more inclusive, and possibly criticize that it does not go far enough in embracing social justice. However, if we dismiss the value of traditional markers of authority and expertise and hold that truth is socially constructed or “a matter of perspective,” we risk descending into relativism, where any opinion is as good as another, and truth is sacrificed to inclusivity. But is there a middle way that acknowledges the limitations and biases of traditional scholarly publishing and acknowledges that “authority may be conferred or manifested in unexpected ways” (ACRL, 2015, p. 13) while maintaining the value of expertise in determining authority, understanding the construction of belief, and stressing the search for truth as a key concept?

Library literature abounds with suggestions for tackling the difficulties involved in evaluating sources, ranging from traditional “checkbox” approaches through strategies and exercises to encourage critical thinking. However, with the notable exception of Badke, Rinne

and Wilkinson, few engage the overarching questions of how expertise and authority are “constructed,” the nature of belief, or the relevance of truth. These are discussions that librarians can and should facilitate, but they must be taken up across the academy. Hughes (2019) suggests integrating research modules into a wide range of courses, an approach that librarians would doubtless welcome. Wright (2019) proposes a “metadisciplinary” component to courses that clarifies the discipline’s overall aims and stresses the search for truth as a “threshold concept” (p. 373). Emphasizing a search for truth as the aim of research would help address Rinne’s (2016, 2017a) criticism that the ACRL authority frame is “truthless.” Incorporating Wilkinson’s (2015) “social epistemology” as a compromise between positivist and social constructionist approaches would also be a useful addition to such discussions, encouraging an understanding that while discovering the truth is a goal, it is not always possible to reach a consensus among people with different, socially mediated, world views.

Discussing the controversies surrounding the nature of truth and challenging “naïve” skepticism – “the view that truth is non-existent, relative, or unknowable” (Wright 2019, p. 362) – can easily lead to a discussion of belief. As we have seen, the construction of belief is complex, and begins with our worldview – or to use Lonergan’s term, our horizon. As Lynch notes, “Our worldview includes not only our beliefs and the concepts we employ in forming our beliefs, but the interests we have that help explain why we have those concepts [and] the values that guide those interests” (1998, p. 51). In other words, we need to question and understand *why* we believe what we believe.

Jarson and Hamlers (2022) report that “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” is the frame least understood by undergraduate students, and that “there was no evidence of students’ self-awareness of their own biases and worldview” (p. 186). Blocksidge and Primeau (2023)

report that students may be “unsure of how to recognize authority in different contexts [or how] individuals and information can have different levels of authority depending on the question being asked”. However, a more promising finding is that their “approach to information that challenges their beliefs is to continue searching ... and students seem also willing to also utilize information that doesn't agree with their own beliefs”. While this is a preliminary study based on a survey rather than direct observation, it suggests that students may not be as resistant to contrary beliefs as we fear.

Conclusion

Unpacking the components that underly the Frame “authority is constructed and contextual” is challenging, especially for librarians who are more comfortable with practical rather than epistemological approaches. However, a multi-disciplinary understanding of truth, authority, expertise and belief adds new dimensions to the implications of the Frame, especially those that are neither obvious nor transparent. The challenge for librarians and all educators is to nurture what Lonergan (1992) calls the pure or unrestricted desire to know (pp. 741-744) and to keep asking questions about truth, authority, expertise, and belief. We need to understand (and convey to our students) the nature and implications of positivist and social constructionist approaches to truth, question why we believe what we are told by others. and appreciate the difference between judgments of fact and judgements of value. Lonergan’s notion of belief as a rational, reflective process *in the pursuit of truth* (1992, p. 741, my italics), along with a greater emphasis on the relationship between expertise and authority, would address some of the limitations in the ACRL Framework and make an important contribution to information literacy. This approach would help our students to make critical judgments about information, transform

information into knowledge, and be better positioned to take reasonable and ethical action that may turn the “post-truth world” in a more positive direction.

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