THE TRUTH IS A SNARE: WILSON AND KIERKEGAARD ON COGNITIVE AUTHORITY (Paper)

Abstract:

Differing conceptions of cognitive authority in library and information science (LIS) obscure best practice for functions of the profession, such as information literacy instruction, that derive from how authority is understood. Some of these conceptions, such as a normative conception of authority, are prominent but not grounded in theory. Accordingly, this paper examines the work of Wilson (1983) and Kierkegaard (1813-1855) in hopes of reminding the profession of its most rigorously articulated formulations of authority. A more critical understanding of this concept is necessary for practice that speaks to the reality of a context bifurcated by adherence to competing authorities.

This paper attempts to remind us that the construction of authority does not rest on objective or rational grounds, but proceeds personally and perhaps somewhat volitionally from the individual, as Wilson (1983) and Kierkegaard (1813-1855) understood. Such an understanding is critical for the relationship between library and information science (LIS) professionals and those the profession aims to serve. Many scholars have noted the significance of fake news, post-truth, and related phenomena to the LIS field (e.g. Strand 2020, Glisson 2019, Buschman 2019, Bluemle 2018), making this issue particularly timely.

The pronounced recent interest in these phenomena evinces concern for the more foundational subject of the authority of information. Nearly two hundred years ago, Kierkegaard said that "if our generation has any task at all, it must be to translate the achievement of scientific scholarship into personal life, to appropriate it personally" (Kierkegaard 1989, p. 328). Kierkegaard appreciates the difficulty our profession faces today of conveying knowledge from its institutionalized origins to individuals. Since Kierkegaard's time, this difficulty has become more and more fraught, as "increasingly we live in a "document society" (Buckland 2017a) in which we depend more and more on recorded statements, on second-hand knowledge (Wilson 1983)" (Buckland 2018, p. 426). People appropriate this second-hand knowledge insofar as they grant it cognitive authority, defined as "influence on one's thoughts that one would consciously recognize as proper" (Wilson 1983, p. 15).

LIS understanding of authority has not always followed Wilson (1983). One prominent school of thought holds that authority is innate to the information item, which item can be said to have authority. Adherents of this school will often point to different markers of authority, the tacit assumption being that the conclusion of how much authority the user *should* ascribe the information item is normative. Fritch & Cromwell (2000) exemplify the views of this normative school of authority. The authors speak of granting "proper amounts of cognitive authority to Internet information," "accurately ascribing cognitive authority," and the possibility that "the authority of a given body of information may be abundantly clear" (Fritch & Cromwell 2000, pp. 499; 506). More recently, Bluemle (2018) argues that the Association of College and Research Libraries' "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" (which represents "the logical place for academic libraries to turn" for guidance on how to approach authority) understands "certain elements of authority as innate" (pp. 269; 271). Similarly, Regazzi (2015) says that scholarly books "get their authority from the authors" and that contributors to edited

volumes "should have demonstrable authority" (pp. 48; 49). However, if we accept Wilson's (1983) definition, we must accept that information does not simply have or possess authority in itself.

It might be argued that to accept a view of authority other than that of Wilson (1983) is a matter of scholarly or professional discretion; indeed, Wilson's (1983) own presentation accounts for such a difference of opinion. However, in most cases the literature has not provided a satisfactory basis for adopting alternatives to Wilson's (1983) understanding, and Wilson (1983) remains the most rigorous work on the subject in LIS. Rather than corroborate this by reference to more recent scholarship, I will appeal to Kierkegaard's understanding of authority, which shares much in common with Wilson (1983). That is, Wilson (1983) appreciates something about the nature of authority itself–something that endures through the passage of centuries.

Central to Wilson's (1983) presentation is that "rationality itself has to be judged solely from within the framework provided by intellectual taste" (p. 68). Intellectual taste determines what comes to be understood as rational. While this may appear absurd from certain perspectives, there is a certain intuitiveness to it. Zagzebski (2012) summarizes a familiar scenario:

> From a perspective inside the community, authority is usually justified by reference to other beliefs that arise from the community...so the justification is circular. …Beliefs [within a community] are insulated from criticism from the outside. It also [is] easy for those on the outside to disregard a community's justification for its authoritative beliefs (p. 2).

This observation exposes the root of much ideological divergence in civic discourse. To illustrate, we might say that people in the LIS community of discourse tend to believe that science communicates many things with authority. For instance, science says that vaccinations are boons to public and private health, that the earth is round and more than four billion years old, and that the use of fossil fuels is causing ecological change that is detrimental to many forms of life. It is not clear that LIS is in a position to be ambivalent about its own beliefs; Wilson (1983) submits that LIS as an institution is practically committed to the authority of certain works (p. 185), and Rinne (2017) suggests that LIS is ethically bound to what it understands to be the truth.

Some might say that the justification for (and "rationality" of) these claims resides in such convictions as the ability for empirical inquiry (codified in various scientific methods) to establish knowledge and the legitimacy of inductive and deductive inference. However, specialists and non-specialists alike rarely verify their beliefs first-hand, and "when it comes to choice among conflicting experts, the outsider will have to rely on the advice of those he trusts or on the final test of intrinsic plausibility" (Wilson 1983, p. 96). Trust in the authority of science is established second-hand, not by re-inventing the wheel, but through trust in written records and academic institutions. In this way, those who ascribe authority to science have much in common with those who ascribe authority to rival sources. In the end, "what kinds of facts to take into account, how seriously to take them, and how to take them are matters settled not by tests of predictive success but by intellectual taste" (Wilson 1983, p. 107).

This is not something that the LIS profession can get around by appeals to the kinds of authority it endorses (i.e., through a normative approach). Information users' taste will always be the decisive factor in determining what they come to accept as true. Kierkegaard articulates both sides of this fact in a memorable turn of phrase: "the truth is a snare: you cannot get it without

being caught yourself; you cannot get the truth by catching it yourself but only by its catching you" (Kierkegaard 1975, p. 503). On the one hand, information items do not possess authority. It can be tempting to claim that the sources we invest with authority possess the truth, but this is an illusion. We cannot ascribe authority to an information item and thereby conclude that the truth inheres in it. No authority can "close" a question for all parties involved; no matter how compelling the authorities that LIS endorses are among the LIS community, other authorities persist (Wilson 1983, p. 18). On the other hand, when we appropriate what we believe and ascribe it authority it "catches" us—it becomes binding for us or comes to have purchase for us. This is what Wilson (1983) ultimately understands in saying that taste becomes the basis of judgements of intellectual soundness and by extension authority. As information seekers and creators, everyone plays an active part in presenting information as true and in understanding information as true.

The CAIS 2020 conference invites research that investigates "potential solutions to bridge unwanted divides or avoid perilous futures," with an emphasis on bifurcation and divergence (CAIS/ACSI, 2019). In a post-truth world, LIS intersects with communities of discourse that branch into opposing ideological camps. At the same time, different views of authority cross through LIS literature and guide practice in different directions. Understanding authority within the discipline can help clarify the ways LIS comports itself towards the diverse user groups that it aims to serve on a daily basis and bridge divides that spring up over questions of authority.

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