

Cognitive Authority

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Patrick Wilson (1983) developed the cognitive authority theory from social epistemology in his book, *Second-hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority*. The fundamental concept of Wilson's cognitive authority is that people construct knowledge in two different ways: based on their first-hand experience or on what they have learned second-hand from others. What people learn first-hand depends on the stock of ideas they bring to the interpretation and understanding of their encounters with the world. People primarily depend on others for ideas as well as for information outside the range of direct experience. Much of what they think of the world is what they have gained second-hand.

Wilson (1983) argues that all that people know of the world beyond the narrow range of their own lives is what others have told them. However, people do not count all hearsay as equally reliable; only those who are deemed to "know what they are talking about" become cognitive authorities. Wilson coined the term *cognitive authority* to explain the kind of authority that influences thoughts that people would consciously recognize being proper. Cognitive authority differs from *administrative authority* or the authority vented in a hierarchical position.

Wilson makes several points about cognitive authority. First, it involves a relationship of at least two people. Thus having cognitive authority differs from being an expert, as a person can

be an expert although unrecognized. Second, cognitive authority is a matter of degree; a little or a lot of it can be possessed. Third, cognitive authority is relative to a sphere of interest. On some questions, a person may speak with authority; but on other questions with none at all. Fourth, cognitive authority clearly relates to credibility: “The authority’s influence on us is thought proper because he is thought credible, worthy of belief” (Wilson, 1983, p. 15). That is, cognitive authorities are among those regarded as credible sources of information.

Wilson claims that it is not always individuals in whom people recognize authority. Cognitive authority is also found in books, instruments, organizations, and institutions. Wilson discusses various external tests for recognizing a text’s cognitive authority. The first consideration is recognition of authorship: “We can trust a text if it is the work of an individual or group of individuals whom we can trust” (p. 166). Wilson states that personal cognitive authority involves only “present reputation and accomplishments up to now” (p. 167). The second consideration is that cognitive authority can be associated with a publisher: a publishing house, a single journal, publication sponsorship, and published reviews, all can acquire this authority. The third consideration is found in document type. For example, a standard dictionary has authority in its own right; people do not concern themselves about the names of compilers in reference books. The fourth and final consideration is the recognition of a text’s contents as plausible or implausible and bestows or withholds authority accordingly. Wilson is particularly concerned with the instant recognition: “a text usually has one chance to capture our attention; reading a few words of it may be enough to discourage us from continuing on to reading the whole thing” (p. 169). Wilson considers cognitive authority as one of the quality control components in information retrieval.

Cognitive authority has recently received renewed attention in information science research. Rieh (2000, 2002) employs this theory to examine the concept of quality and authority in the Web from the perspective of information seeking behavior. The results of Rieh's study tend to validate Wilson's theory by demonstrating that Web searchers make judgments of quality and authority primarily based on their knowledge (domain knowledge, system knowledge), in addition to characteristics of sources (URL domain, type, reputation, single-collective, author/creator credentials) and characteristics of information objects (type, title, content, organization/structure, presentation, graphics, functionality). The subjects in Rieh's study often select Web pages when there is some indication of source authority based on their own experience, other people's recommendations, or something that they have heard. Rieh notes that the subjects often refer to "other people" who apparently serve as cognitive authorities; these can include friends, colleagues, doctors, or academics. The subjects' cognitive authorities are also newspapers, journal articles, and even television advertisements.

Fritch and Cromwell (2001) present a theoretical model for gathering and assessing Internet information based on Wilson's cognitive authority theory. They argue that traditional measures of authority present in a print environment are lacking on the Internet and there is an increasing need for evaluating the authority of Internet information. They provide specific criteria to be considered, suggesting four primary filters for ascribing cognitive authority: filter for document, filter for author, filter for institution, and filter for affiliation.

McKenzie (2003) takes a constructionist approach to the theory of cognitive authority, arguing that descriptions of cognitive authority may be understood not as accurate representations of beliefs or attitudes but rather everyday fact constructions. She examines the issues of authoritative knowledge in the information seeking of pregnant women and analyzes

the language they use to create cognitive authority descriptions in relation to discursive action.

McKenzie concludes: “constructionist discourse analytic methods are particularly appropriate for identifying the specific strategies used by participants in creating their cognitive authority descriptions.” (p. 283).

Wilson’s conceptualization of cognitive authority provides numerous implications for information behavior. When people look for information, they interact with texts or information systems. Each information medium (book, journal, newspaper, or Web) has its own quality control mechanisms. Consequently, there are a number of aspects of quality that can be recognized. The aspects of quality are, however, not always consistent: people may find a text which seems to be clearly written but is inaccurate or stimulating but unsound. In such cases, they rely on credibility, a chief aspect of quality, by asking “Can one believe what the text says, or can one at least take it seriously?” (Wilson, p. 171). When people find a source for which they are looking, they appropriately ask “Do I need to look further, or can I take this source as settling the matter?” If at this point people are already convinced of the source’s authority, the question is already answered. But, if people are unfamiliar with the source, the question is likely to arise explicitly.

Wilson’s theory indicates that in recognizing cognitive authorities people have bases or reasons for judgments of authority. Whatever their reasons that other people or materials deserve cognitive authority, people may not be able to describe their reasons on a quantitatively measurable scale. People can only justify their assessment of authority by citing indirect bases. Therefore, to understand cognitive authority, information behavior researchers must ask open rather than closed questions. Rieh (2000, 2002) finds that evaluation of cognitive authority is subjective, relative, and situational rather than objective, absolute, and universally recognizable.

As McKenzie (2003) points out, it is also important to understand people's judgments of cognitive authority and bases for such judgments not on the level of verbal expressions but on the deeper cognitive levels.

The theory of cognitive authority closely relates to the notion of relevance in information retrieval. In traditional information retrieval, the problem of relevance judgment and selection of information has long been discussed within the context of topical relevance; e.g., in terms of whether the query topic matches the document topic. In the 1990s, however, a number of empirical studies about relevance have revealed that people use substantially more diverse relevance criteria than mere topicality when making relevance judgments (Mizzaro, 1997). Rieh's research (2000, 2002) implies that the theories of relevance judgment and criteria can be advanced by examining specific primary factors, such as information quality and cognitive authority.

Authority issues are currently receiving much attention not only in information science but also in other fields including education, human-computer interaction, and computer science (e.g., Fogg, 2003). However, researchers who have studied information quality and Web credibility problems from outside of the information science field rarely cite Wilson's cognitive authority theory or any other theories and models of information behavior. Conversely, information behavior researchers have long used numerous theories from other fields. The time seems to be right for information behavior researchers to discuss the dissemination and sharing of information behavior theories beyond their own information science field.

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