Authority Is Constructed and Contextual

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ACRL Definition

“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.” - http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework#authority
In other words...

Authority - influence that is exerted and/or accepted within a given context.

Constructed – the meaning of expertise and authority are defined by members of a given group and may vary from one group to the next.

Contextual – the authoritativeness of a source depends on one’s information needs and how the disciplines defines authority.
Authority example

Fake News
Recently an article has been making the rounds on Facebook that states a misleading article claimed that an association of pediatricians had “admitted” a link between the human papillomavirus vaccine Gardasil and ovarian “failure” or cancer.

The American College of Pediatrics (ACP) is responsible for this claim.

• What is their authority to make this claim?
Authority example

About the organization:
- Formed in 2002
- ACP “bases its policies and positions upon scientific truth within a framework of ethical absolutes.” (From acpeds.org)
  - Further biases revealed by the organization’s opposition to children being raised in non traditional marriage households.
- Claims made on the website were not cited with any resources
  - Rhetoric was used extensively on the website but claims that were made were not substantiated with evidence.

How is the ACP is able to do this?
The ACP is not to be confused with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), who is viewed as an authority on childhood pediatrics.

- Organization was formed in 1929
- Grew out of the American Medical Association section on Diseases of Children Meeting.
- Organization provides resources for all claims on the org’s website.
- Stated membership of 66,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subject specialists and pediatric surgical specialists. (https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/Pediatric-History-Center/Pages/AAP-History.aspx)
Authority & Primary Sources

Special Collections and archives are the stewards of primary source materials. Authority is created by creating tools to help locate primary sources, using standardized language, and creating metadata for items.

- Tools: standardized finding aids, indexes, digital repositories
- Standardized language: Controlled vocabulary - Name Authority Records, Thesaurus of Graphic Materials, Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)
  - Research HacK: In the electronic environment-- like library catalogs-- this language is often linked information that can help in discovering other like materials.
Establishing Authority

What to look for when establishing authority:

• **Consistency** -
  o providing consistent information creates trustworthiness
  o Trustworthy resources are authoritative

• **Time** -
  o Resources of information that have survived the tests of time are often regarded as authoritative

• **Acceptance** -
  o Authority isn’t conferred, it is defined within a specific group for a specific purpose.
  o Do you trust a medical organization that is a more established organization with a proven track record over a very young organization that bases policies on non scientific information?
Establishing Authority

• Expertise -
  o Identify something in which you’ve some expertise. Because you have in-depth knowledge or experience, you evaluate related information differently than you evaluate information related to things you know nothing about, right? Why?
  o We all use our pre existing knowledge and previous experiences to better understand the authority of and to evaluate and use the information we come into contact with.
(re)Evaluating Authority

• Ask questions about how the information was created, its purpose, and its appropriateness for your needs.
• Acknowledge that labels such as author credentials, “peer-review,” publication source (journal / publisher / platform reputation) are not failsafe; consider more nuanced and discipline-specific indicators of authority.
• Accept potential authority of “outsiders,” be open to new perspectives, previously marginalized voices, and changes in schools of thought.
• Address biases that privilege some sources of authority over others and perpetuate discrimination.