

“Michelle Obama is a man”: Problematizing Authority in Today's Post-Truth, Post-Trust World Carol A. Leibiger (University of South Dakota); Alan W. Aldrich (University of South Dakota)

We appear to live in a post-truth, post-trust world. Increasingly alienated from and distrustful of larger social structures, people often choose to congregate in smaller tribal groups with shared beliefs and values. Our society is increasingly skeptical of traditional authority, mainstream media, and scholarly experts and sources. Students seem to reflect this break with tradition. They do not appear to discriminate between opinion and scholarly discourse, or to separate personal beliefs from knowledge. Purveyors of fake news exploit this failure to discriminate.

Information-literacy (IL) instruction seeks to teach students to make the above distinctions as they navigate the information landscape. The Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education may inform this instruction. For instance, the Authority frame states that contexts and notions of authority differ while recognizing the legitimacy of personal or tribal beliefs within appropriate contexts. Information-literate people need to distinguish different kinds of authority within and across differing contexts, including citizenship, academic or professional communities, and media or consumer groups.

The Framework originated within the context of academic research and information use. As such, the frames display weaknesses when applied in nonacademic contexts. In their roles as citizens, consumers of information must navigate information resources that cannot be effectively evaluated using only academic IL criteria. Fake news demonstrates the—potentially dangerous—limitations of the Authority frame.

Fake news resembles gossip, in that both are often wielded with intent, which can be malicious. Purveyors of fake news belong to a select/elite group possessing knowledge not accepted by the mainstream. The speaker knows the “truth” of a given situation, which runs counter to establishment “facts.” Tribal knowledge and authority are validated over establishment knowledge and authority, thus creating and sustaining tribal affinity.

The Authority frame, anchored in the context of academic research, assumes the unexpressed motivations underlying the academic context (e.g., knowledge leads to truth). The Authority frame rightly calls for acknowledgement of bias. However, this is insufficient for understanding fake news, which is an intentional form of communication involving deliberate deception. Understanding senders’ motives, as well as recipients’ bias, is crucial to understanding and resisting fake news.

As a result of this presentation, participants will understand that motive both underlies and influences communication. Additionally, they will learn to identify and question motives inherent in fake news. Finally, they will consider possible revisions to the Authority frame to better understand non-academic communication like fake news.