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Reddit as an Analogy for Scholarly Publishing and the Constructed, Contextual Nature of Authority

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of how the social news site Reddit can be used as an example of the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* threshold concept “Authority is Constructed and Contextual.” It posits that the construction and context of authority in the sense of Wilson’s concept of *cognitive authority* is in the inherent structure of Reddit and that students can benefit from an example that easily links their personal and academic lives—a connection not always made when discussing authority in peer-reviewed publications or databases.

Keywords: information literacy, Reddit, authority, threshold concepts, cognitive authority

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Reddit as an Analogy for Scholarly Publishing and the Constructed, Contextual Nature of Authority

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) adopted the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* “out of a belief that information literacy . . . will reach its full potential only through a richer, more complex set of core ideas” (ACRL, 2015, p.7). The *Framework* introduces six frames as threshold concepts, a term that refers to “those ideas in any discipline that are passageways or portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing within that discipline” (p.7). This paper highlights a functional example of the frame “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” as demonstrated through the social news site Reddit.

Reddit can serve as an analogy for scholarly publishing and displays the contextual, constructed nature of authority. Making this process visible to students allows them to transfer a threshold concept and information literacy skills from their personal lives to their academic lives. Reddit is an excellent venue for students to see information literacy threshold concepts about authority being constructed and contextual in action as they, themselves, can engage in the construction in ways they rarely do when authority is discussed strictly within the confines of the scholarly publishing system.

The Frame: “Authority is Constructed and Contextual”

The *Framework*’s text for “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” reads, in part:

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 goes on to discuss how experts and novices engage with the idea of authority, the role of bias in authority, and how a deep understanding of authority may lead to a balance of “informed skepticism” and “openness to new perspectives” (ACRL, 2015, p. 12).

This frame is particularly appropriate for study because of its long-standing importance in library and information science contexts. Instruction librarians across disciplines have taught elements of authority—how to recognize it, evaluate it, challenge it—for years before the *Framework* or its predecessor, the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher*

Education, were published. In fact, in addition to the frame's language on authority, this paper relies on Wilson's (1983) concept of *cognitive authority*, which is most simply described as "influence on one's thoughts that one would consciously recognize as proper" (p. 15). Cognitive authority is separate from *administrative authority* in that the latter involves power bequeathed to an individual by virtue of position, whereas the former considers level of expertise, social relationship, and sphere of knowledge. Librarians who teach students to identify authorities based on competency and trustworthiness work towards answering Wilson's basic challenges: "Why do you listen to [your cognitive authority]? . . . Why do you let [them] influence you so? . . . What qualifies [them] to speak on the subject?" (p. 21). These are exactly the questions with which the *Framework* is concerned—examining the process of constructing authorities in each student's particular context. Authority may evolve as it resonates in the lives and studies of academic library patrons, but it is unlikely to disappear. Thus, it is a useful concept to explore from the perspective of librarians.

Much of the published work on teaching the concept of authority, including Wilson's (1991), has focused on the traditional indicators of authority as they appear in scholarly publishing venues. Librarians help students understand and value peer review, consider citation metrics, and evaluate author credentials, all while acknowledging, as the *Framework* does, the inherent ambiguity and discomfort in doing so. To combat some of this discomfort, librarians have adapted lesson plans to represent disciplinary differences and interests (see for example, Godbey, Wainscott, & Goodman, 2017; Kuglitsch, 2015, 2017). In many cases, regardless of discipline, teaching only these static signifiers of authority can allow students to passively accept that scholarly sources, and those who write them, are inherently superior, even if they have only a vague understanding of what makes those sources scholarly. Bravender, McClure, and Schaub (2015) pointed out that novice researchers find themselves constrained by "prescriptive requirements for information sources" when assignments ask students to cite a certain number of sources from peer-reviewed journals rather than require them to evaluate and defend their own sources (p. 63). The frame also mentions that "basic indicators of authority," as opposed to "schools of thought or discipline-specific paradigms," might form the basis of a novice information seeker's skills (ACRL, 2015, p. 12). Bravender et al. (2015) noted that students must understand how authority in these contexts is constructed so that they can "begin to understand that their need for information and the purpose for which they will use it determines the value of that information" (p. 63).

Anecdotally, many students see their need for information and purpose for using it to be the completion of an assignment that will be graded by their professor rather than a work that will contribute to the construction of their own expertise and authority in a peer-reviewed environment. Students who do not understand academic publishing or intend to publish may merely accept that the sources they use must be peer-reviewed without delving into the actual processes that underpin scholarly publication. How, then, are they to connect authority construction in academic sources to how they develop their own cognitive authorities? Even with limited instruction time, librarians should teach the constructional and contextual nature of authority as it meets the needs for information in the traditional world of scholarly publishing and also in the non-academic lives of their students in order to create sustainable links between the two.

Learning for Transfer

A goal of teaching threshold concepts, and teaching in general, is transfer: Students who learn skills or gain understandings in one context should be able to perform those skills or apply those understandings in a new one. Librarians hope that their students will grasp information literacy threshold concepts and recognize them as truisms in their biology class as easily as they do in a philosophy class. Scholars have considered how information literacy skills can transfer from school to the workforce or between disciplines, and this paper calls for a transfer from personal life to academic life, highlighting the relationship users have to their information (Eyre, 2012; Kuglitsch, 2015; Lloyd, 2003, 2005, 2010). Bruce (1997) introduced a relational practice of information literacy, which considers the relationship between the learner, the information, the need, and the environment and enables transfer when students learn skills that transcend the completion of a single assigned task. Students experience information needs not only in class but also in their daily lives, though they may not view those needs as equivalent.

Librarians may hope to change that, however, as they see how students practice authority construction. Thirty years before the introduction of the *Framework*, Wilson (1983) pointed out that all people create *patterns of recognition* of cognitive authority from birth, a process that continues rapid-fire throughout development and life stages. In this way, undergraduate students gaining information literacy skills have practiced constructing authorities and evaluating information throughout their lives and are likely even more skilled in this area than Wilson would have guessed as a result of the internet and availability of information. A metacognitive awareness of that process in their private lives

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may provide an avenue for transfer to their academic ones and back again. Kuglitsch (2015) supported this method, saying “if our aim is to teach students the generalized skills of information literacy . . . the best way to do so is to explicitly situate those generalized skills . . . in a domain familiar to students” (p. 466). This paper introduces one such familiar domain—an everyday, surprisingly fruitful source of information and a specific (but generalizable) context in which authority is constructed in a way similar to that of scholarly publishing: Reddit. Although Reddit self-styles with a lowercase ‘r’ (reddit), this paper, like most studying the site, uses *Reddit* for consistency and aesthetic preference.

Reddit: An Introduction

Founded in 2005 by then-recent-college-graduates Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, Reddit is a social news site that describes itself as the front page of the internet. Users or *redditors* (styled as u/nameofuser) post, read, and comment on threads in more than 130,000 *subreddits* (styled as r/nameofsubreddit), forums or message boards organized around certain topics and shared interests. Reddit is not the first of its kind; sites such as Digg and Delicious have provided similar spaces, but neither has displayed the popularity and staying power of Reddit. In 2017, Alexa named Reddit the fifth most visited site in the US (“Reddit by the numbers”) and a 2013 Pew Research Center poll estimated that 6% of adults are redditors (Duggan & Smith, 2013). This estimate is likely low, considering that popularity of the site has risen since 2013 and that this figure does not include users who live outside the United States, are minors, or are lurkers. Reddit’s home page claims an average of 330 million active users each month, though for reasons to be discussed, the accuracy of this number could be called into question.

Why study Reddit as an example of a real-life information literacy frame if it lags behind other social networking sites in views and usage? For academic librarians, it holds a certain relevance: In 2016, a reported 64% of Reddit users were between the ages of 18 and 29 and another 29% were between 30 and 49 (Barthel, Stocking, Holcomb, & Mitchell 2016). Assuming the accuracy of those numbers, 93% of redditors belong to populations often found on college campuses, even when accounting for the majority of nontraditional students. While Facebook and Instagram have higher numbers of users overall, Reddit has an advantage in that it is not a primarily social networking venue but a social news site, which provides a meaningful crossover between topics thought of as general interest and those considered scholarly or academic. Facebook might remind users of their friends’

birthdays, but the blend of topics on Reddit—politics, news, makeup tutorials, movie reviews, hobbies and more—provides a perfect breeding ground for both high- and low-stakes construction of cognitive authorities. Although Reddit is not inherently scholarly, it does not exclude scholarly conversation, whereas on Facebook inspiring true discourse can be a challenge. Among the 50 most popular subreddits, as measured by number of users subscribed, one finds not only topics like r/funny and r/gaming (for funny and video game-related content, respectively) but also r/science, r/space, r/philosophy, and r/history, topics that could just as easily be headings in a library database.

With over 15 million subscribers as of June 2019, one such subreddit is r/explainlikeimfive (ELI5), which is devoted to questions on any topic (e.g., How do snails get shells? What is a 403(b) retirement plan? How do dry cells work differently than wet cells?). A user who answers a posed question does so assuming no prior knowledge on the part of the asker and instead discusses the topic in a way friendly to non-experts, as though the readers were five years old. ELI5 was closely studied by Pflugfelder (2017) as a source of technical writing, drawing heavily on examples involving space engineering, a topic easily considered scholarly. ELI5 and similar subreddits provide examples of both personal and academic information needs and, in some cases, blur the lines between the two. In answering a question or having one answered, a user must determine who the authority is and why. Who will they reference if they are answering a question? Who will they listen to if they are asking one? ELI5 is one of many instances on Reddit where users engage information literacy skills in a social setting that easily transfers to work they may complete in academic contexts. In one instance, a redditor asked “ELI5 how drugs like bath salts and amphetamines give people ‘super human strength’” (u/I_Zeig_I, 2019). Users gave diverse responses, one describing the chemical structure of amphetamines, one giving anecdotal evidence from their work in hospital emergency rooms, and some describing fight-or-flight responses in crisis scenarios. At several points, users linked to peer-reviewed journals to defend their explanations. The question was answered in several, sometimes conflicting ways, and ended with a new question, which began the process anew.

The existence of users who create easy-to-understand explanations of complex concepts and phenomena in subreddits like ELI5 suggests that some redditors are generally recognizable as experts and that authority on the internet might not always be different from authority in the classroom. Ovadia (2015) supported this presumption, noting that academics from varied disciplines can and do use Reddit to keep up with new developments in their fields and to converse with other interested parties in an informal way. For example, Anderson

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(2015) suggested that librarians, themselves, join the conversation at r/libraries and other subreddits on information topics in order to network and share ideas. Other subreddits, like r/askscience, depend on the presence of experts, as both questions and answers posted tend to be scientific, specific, and less likely to appeal to a lay person. In fact, some users in this and similar subs attach labels, known as *flair*, to their posts to identify themselves as an expert in a specific area (a small box that reads “animal behavior,” “electromagnetics,” or any other area of study appears next to their usernames). Other users informally refer to their expertise in posts or comments, describing how their work in a PhD program or a research lab informs their knowledge on a topic. As Wilson (1983) noted, relevant occupational and educational background are common bases for naming an authority, but this expertise alone does not automatically create an authority; it is certainly possible for a person to have the markers of expertise without having gained the trust of others (p. 21). The *Framework* also refers to author credentials as a basic indicator of authority for novice learners. With these markers of expertise appearing in Reddit, students with varying levels of skill evaluating information can use them as part of their metacognitive practice in authority construction. Overall, Ovadia (2015) and Anderson (2015) agreed that Reddit is an underutilized source of scholarly study and a breeding ground of information literacy behaviors, which is particularly true when librarians examine how the construction of authority and discourse on Reddit can be considered an analogy for scholarly publishing.

Publishing, Reddit, and Peer Review

Reddiquette and Rules for Submission

The peer-reviewed journals librarians recommend their students search for as high-quality sources have author and reviewer guidelines, sometimes frustratingly specific documents that outline how submissions should be formatted, what they should and should not contain, and the journal’s review process. In general, students who have yet to publish in academic venues are unlikely to have read these documents. However, though they are unaware of the standards for publication, they continue to rely on the voices published in these journals as authorities for their assignments. As a result, many students remain unaware of the context for construction of their supposed cognitive authorities. Students may be aware that one of the conditions of peer review is meeting author guidelines, and subsequently prefer the sources that do so, but are given few footholds to conceptualize what that might look like or why they lend themselves to credibility.

In a venue more often frequented by students, Reddit and its subs use similar documentation to guide the creation of posts. Overlying the entire site is *Reddiquette*, “an informal expression of the values of many redditors” (“Reddiquette,” n.d.). Informal though it may be, Reddiquette also recommends that users abide by these suggestions in their submissions. Similar to author guidelines, Reddiquette outlines the characteristics of successful submissions and the values of the community. Some of the points of Reddiquette are specific to the internet age (e.g., “remember the human”), but others would not be uncommon on a list of author guidelines (e.g., “keep your posts factual,” “link to original sources,” “post to the most appropriate community”). Others look like the guidelines given to journal reviewers: One point reminds readers to post constructive criticism where beneficial, but to do so tactfully. These types of guidelines could be considered common sense (e.g., “make sure your title is spelled correctly,”), but they are also the types of things of which authors of both internet forum postings and academic articles can stand to be reminded. Reddiquette, like general scholarly publishing etiquette, overlies the contextual conversations of each environment; abiding by the rules or suggestions is often the first step to being named an authority or to having your voice heard at all.

Those who do regularly read, review, or submit to academic journals know that merely following general guidelines is not enough to guarantee successful publication. Instead, every publisher, or in some cases, every title, requires that authors meet specific criteria in order to be considered for publication, such as length of article, formatting of graphs or images, and inclusion of relevant data. Each subreddit similarly creates lists of rules in a sidebar for all users to consult before posting. These rules are specific to the topics of the subreddit or are created in reaction to issues that have occurred in the past. Just as authors comply with the guidelines of a journal before their works are published, redditors must comply with the guidelines of a subreddit or risk their posts being removed by moderators, the administrative authority of Reddit. Moderators are analogous to journal editors who will not accept a paper if it does not conform to the community standards. If a user disregards the rules of a subreddit (e.g., by trying to sell a product or by neglecting to link to a source) a moderator will remove the post in the same way that a journal editor or reviewer would reject a poorly supported paper. Thus, the guidelines set the standard for how a post is perceived by the group.

Voting and Karma

Like most networking and news sites, group validation occurs on Reddit. The construction of an authority in the context of a subreddit is particularly evident through the voting/karma system, which operates in some ways similar to a large-scale peer reviewer system. Every user can vote once on every post and comment. An upvote is positive, working with Reddit's algorithm to make a post more visible, but a downvote makes a post harder to find.

In voting, redditors take an active role in creating the authorities of any given subreddit—more upvotes results in more perceived authority and more easily located posts. The number of upvotes, with downvotes subtracted, gives a post and the user who submitted it an official ranking known as *karma*. In this way, redditors create a sense of general consensus—a valuable thing in cognitive authority since “if everyone recognizes A as an authority . . . I am likely to do so as well and think myself justified in doing so” (Wilson, 1983, p. 23). A heavily downvoted post can have negative karma, and two posts on similar topics from around the same time might have disparate karmic numbers, indicating that one was well received while the other was disparaged for reasons that are sometimes clear and sometimes opaque.

In this way, voting redditors are acting as anonymous reviewers and can be of benefit for students learning about how authorities are constructed and how certain articles proceed through the peer-review process to accepted publication. When students peruse peer-reviewed journals, only successful articles are available; they cannot see what articles were submitted and reviewed unfavorably or were the subject of disagreement. As a result, they may revert to the supposition that what was accepted into the peer-reviewed journal is innately more authoritative than what was not. In a Reddit thread, however, readers can see exactly how many people voted up and down and may individually agree or disagree with the group consensus.

Additionally, Reddiquette suggests that a downvote should be accompanied by an explanation (a sort of reviewer comment), which means that often readers can see not only how popular a post is but also the reason why. As they participate in both constructing the authorities of a conversation by voting, they also learn to identify the patterns of socially-vetted discourse. This experience serves as a benchmark for writing and submitting their own posts or participating in the reviewing process by voting. If users see that posts

exceeding one paragraph or containing pictures and links to outside sources are more successful and have higher karma numbers than posts without these characteristics, they can realize that they should to do the same when they submit their own post. Academics, too, learn to honor these practices and utilize them in order to fit more neatly into a particular journal or field's rhetoric. Students who are successful at this behavior in Reddit can transfer the underlying principles (e.g., obeying the rules, and noticing patterns of success) from social news to academic life, demonstrating, as the *Framework* describes "that various communities may recognize different types of authority" (ACRL, 2015, p. 12).

Anonymity

In library sessions, students are often able to repeat what they have likely been told: Blind peer review, in which reviewers and authors are anonymous, is important in order to avoid bias in scholarly publishing. Just as journals utilize different types of blindness in their review systems, social news and networking sites require or promote varying levels of transparency in their users. Whereas people use Facebook to divulge information about their real lives, sharing images and posting connections to others, and Instagram influencers work to make their actual selves a marketable brand, Reddit is unusual in the social news and networking worlds in that it encourages the anonymity of its users. Unlike the doomed networking site Google+, which notoriously required users to register with their real names, Reddit requires only a username and a password—even an email is optional. When a redditor creates a post or comments on a thread, the writer and the reader are largely unknown to one another. This is analogous to a double-blind journal article submission in which the acceptability of the post (or article) is judged—upvoted or downvoted—on content. This level of anonymity not only protects redditors but also enhances the metaphor of authority construction as it relates to scholarly publishing; a student can see how anonymity serves the process as both an author and a reviewer.

True anonymity, of course, in scholarly publishing, on the internet, and in the creation of authority is rare. While the structure of Reddit encourages its users to remain anonymous, personal information does still come to light. Personal characteristics sometimes validate the content of a posting, such as professional credentials, or are inadvertently revealed. Most commonly, users give their gender and age as context for a post; however, transparency can also have consequences. Finlay (2014) noted that post and comment success varies across gender and age lines, and redditors are not ignorant of how vulnerability might impact their experiences. This phenomenon is not limited to the relative informality of internet forum:

Scholars face similar inequities largely across disciplines (West, Jacquet, King, Correll, & Bergstrom, 2013). These qualities are part of how authority is constructed and contextual: The *Framework* states that experts in this area “acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others’ worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations” (ACRL, 2015, p. 12).

Undergraduate students, who may not yet have considered submitting to an academic journal, do understand the precarious benefit and risk of online anonymity and take precautions to maintain that balance carefully. For example, Kang and Wei (2019) noted the proliferation of *finstas* (fake Instagram accounts) among this age group. In these cases, individuals will maintain two Instagram accounts: one that presents a sanitized, on-brand version of the user and one that presents a more authentic, less edited view. The *finstas* are typically set to private so that individuals can monitor who gains access.

Users on Reddit go through a similar, even more anonymized process. In order to join desired conversations but not expose themselves unnecessarily, redditors might also maintain multiple accounts. Typically, one account is primary, which they use to participate in typical conversations and subreddits. These posts remain linked to their primary usernames so that others can read through their post histories and view the associated karmas. Redditors who are particularly active in certain conversations become recognizable by their usernames; every post adds to their online identity formation, just as every article scholars publish contributes to their academic reputation. Wilson (1983) called this *acquired cognitive authority*: “If a source repeatedly tells me things that I find illuminating and that ring true, I may come to expect more of the same from him [and] refer others to him” (p. 24).

When Reddit users want to ask a question or contribute to a conversation in a way that might be seen as embarrassing, unsavory, or simply off-brand, they utilize additional accounts, called *throwaway accounts*. These accounts are divorced from their primary counterparts with the goal of being unidentifiable in a way that is equivalent to publishing anonymously or under a pseudonym. Academics often avoid acquiring throwaway publishing records by carefully constructing their research agendas to maintain their individual brands. When their real-life karmas go down, as they do when scholars publish controversial articles or have papers retracted, they do not have throwaway personas to blame for their lost reputation. Undergraduate students, too, are aware of how carefully an individual must curate what they share online, as exhibited by their use of throwaway

accounts or finstas. Identity formation as it exists within their social networks is an easy metaphor for the formation of a professional identity through publication, particularly when considering how anonymity might help and hinder the construction of authority.

Trolling and the Dark Side of Scholarship

Of course, anonymity on Reddit or in scholarly publishing is not without its dangers. Most internet-savvy users are likely familiar with trolls, individuals who engage online primarily to frustrate, confuse, mislead, or anger others (Bergstrom, 2011). Trolls take advantage of anonymity, posing as legitimate users or simply antagonizing others. Trolling can go as far as doxxing, which involves sharing others' personal details (e.g., addresses, real names, photos, places of employment) for the purposes of harassment. In contrast, trolling may also be innocuous, as in the case of Grandpa Wiggly, a young, male redditor who posed as a senior citizen under the guise of this user name (Bergstrom, 2011). Grandpa Wiggly was not at all nefarious in his activity; still, when his falsehood was discovered, many Reddit users spoke out against him as a liar and a troll who exploited the privilege of anonymity (u/Insomniasexx, 2010). Grandpa Wiggly, instead, viewed his deception as a form of performance art.

Trolls may be most prevalent on the internet, but they exist elsewhere. Students might be surprised to learn that trolls and antagonists are also found in the academy. In part because of differing ideologies and cognitive authorities, academics can fight to the bitter death over scientific theory and new discoveries, lobbing death threats and four-letter words at one another (Bosker 2018). And, similar to the redditor Grandpa Wiggly, hoaxes or jokes also exist in publishing. For example, Sokal Squared, a team of three authors, successfully published entirely fabricated grievance studies papers in prestigious journals as a social experiment. The authors themselves referred to it as a "hoax" to expose what they felt to be weaknesses in the scholarly publication model (Pluckrose, Lindsay, & Boghossian, 2018). The Sokal Squared team felt that in certain fields, the academic peer-review system allowed for "sophistry" over "knowledge production": The authors' goal was to get "something absurd or deeply unethical (or both) . . . published in the academic canon" (Pluckrose, Lindsay, & Boghossian, 2018). For example, the team published an article entitled "Human Reaction to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon," in which the fake author claimed to witness one dog rape per hour. In other terms, they trolled.

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Some scholars—and some redditors—think trolls are funny, interesting, or, at the very least, expected. In response to the outrage over Grandpa Wiggly, one redditor posted “It probably is fake, but who cares . . . loosen up and have some fun” (u/Insomniasexx, 2010). Others are angry that trolls even exist, particularly when they have been fooled into trusting a troll as a cognitive authority (Grandpa Wiggly, for example, innocently purported to be a salsa connoisseur). Wilson (1983) assured readers that being tricked into “mistaken recognitions of cognitive authority” is not uncommon; considering elements like reputation, education, plausibility of truth, and prior knowledge may still lead you to a “false prophet” (p. 33). For instance, the Sokal Squared authors were initially invited to serve as reviewers for conferences and journals before their trick was exposed. After they were found out, some scholars hailed them as “hilarious and delightful,” while others felt the stunt should disqualify them from their communities of practice (Kafka, 2018). Looking at Reddit as though it were a scholarly journal, highlights how the conversations that take place in both venues are similar and how the voices that speak, including authorities, trolls, and newcomers, fall into the same categories. If students can find a troll on Reddit, maybe they can transfer those skills to identify trustworthy authorities in the academic literature while simultaneously acknowledging the existence of bad faith actors and flawed studies. Seeing Reddit and scholarly publishing as equivalent contexts (with obviously different purposes) may assist in pattern recognition. Students can challenge or disbelieve authors of peer-reviewed publications or deny them status as cognitive authorities rather than give them passive recognition, reinforcing the “openness to new perspectives” and the “informed skepticism” of experts within the *Framework* (ACRL, 2015, p. 12).

Conclusion

Librarians may choose simply to use Reddit as an example when discussing how authority is constructed and contextual in information literacy classrooms. Future research could also focus on the effectiveness of specific metaphors, references, and lesson plans that overlap Reddit and information literacy practices. Dietering and Groening (2011) made a similar argument for teaching students to interact with scholars’ blogs, in some cases culminating with an assignment in the form of public writing, such as a blog post or comment. Students should be invited to engage with Reddit, but requiring participation may be unadvisable because Reddit is largely hostile towards insincerity. As Sanderson and Rigby (2013) reported, librarians and vendors who post even highly relevant threads on outreach or marketing are downvoted to oblivion. Students engaging with Reddit solely for a grade or

to prove what they have learned are likely to face similar vitriol. This experience could be an important continuing lesson on the intolerance of violating the standards of a community, but perhaps not the lesson librarians seek to teach. However, students may benefit as they identify instances of authority construction in subreddits of their choosing, potentially topics relevant to classwork or simply personal interest. They will find disagreements, detailed objections to individual arguments, requests for further evidence, and, of course, upvotes, downvotes, high and low karma scores, and more. As they recognize the qualities and factors that contribute to authority construction in the context of Reddit, students can be invited to explore the context of scholarly publishing and to describe the similarities.

Librarians can create an environment in information literacy classrooms where this level of transfer—from a familiar, social news domain to a less transparent academic publishing domain—is possible in a way that emphasizes the benefit to the student: understanding what constitutes a personal cognitive authority in different contexts while also gaining comprehension of how peer-reviewed journals can be evaluated in similar ways. Some students will go on to work closely with academic literature or write it themselves, and familiarity with the process before they begin may provide some footing in an otherwise new territory. Other students will graduate and cease to engage with primarily academic information. These students will, however, continue their information-heavy lives and construct cognitive authorities in part on social media and news sites. Luckily, the conversation Wilson (1983) suggested individuals have with themselves when determining whether they have found a cognitive authority is not situated only in the academy:

I find myself much impressed by what A said, and of course he's had a great deal of experience in matters like this. On the other hand, what B says is not implausible, it certainly might be true, and he does have impressive qualifications. But when it comes down to a decision, I find that I am more drawn to A's side than B's. (p. 32)

The threshold concept “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” remains as true for the students who go on to become recognized experts in their fields as it is for those who use information only to make practical life decisions; the *participatory web*, as coined by Dietering and Groening (2011), is therefore both. Reddit may be a controversial or surprising environment to serve as a threshold into lifelong information literacy, but librarians who work closely and carefully with students in a variety of disciplines can help them transfer skills from one domain to another.

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