

Lesson 5: Cognitive authorities. (This lecture varies somewhat from the lecture).

There are many cognitive authorities in our life. We restrict discussion to the dominant one's in the current disinformation campaigns.

Key ideas:

- (1) Cognitive authority is related to credibility, competence, and trustworthiness.
- (2) Cognitive authority exists on a continuum, exists in relation to a sphere of interest, and involves at least two people.
- (3) Cognitive authorities can be friends, colleagues, peers, news media, Internet blogs, Twitter feeds, news channels, social media sites, etc.
- (4) Examples of cognitive authorities are news sites representing different points of a political spectrum: e.g., Fox News or MSNBC.
- (5) For news sites, the measure of their credibility or trustworthiness is related to consumer loyalty. This observation is true for both authentic and false cognitive authorities.
- (6) News media can produce assertions as "true opinions," "false opinions," or "preferential opinions." They exist as opinions in the minds of the consumers until they are verified or not, or whether or when there are grounds for not needing to pursue their verification.
- (7) Human beings may employ heuristics or mental shortcuts to deal with information. Unfortunately, "These mental shortcuts exacerbate the human inability to see the world as it really is" (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019, p. 9). The use of these mental shortcuts can be true of those who are either conservative or liberal or political actors of another stripe.
- (8) Consumers of news media hear content from Fox News or MSNBC and may absorb the provided opinions as second-hand knowledge. This regular consumption may result in a heuristic, to trust this source, regardless of its actual basis in truth or evidence.
- (9) The ultimate determination of whether a cognitive authority is genuine or false is not a measure of consumer loyalty, but whether their posted content *can* be ultimately authenticated and verified.
- (10) There are enhancers or accelerators that make such news, particularly fake news, more plausible:
 - (a) Psychological factors addressed in the last lesson, such as prejudice, resentment, greed, power, or other motivations, predispose those disinformed to embrace and perpetuate disinformation.
 - (b) Repeating information, true or not, increases its believability and this applies to newspaper headlines, statements, or speeches (Pennycook, Cannon & Rand, 2018). It also applies to cable news and their pundits, their consumers, their peer groups, party or viewpoint, associates or associations, and leaders (including religious leaders).
 - (c) There are bubble filters or propaganda feedback loops that reinforce biased content, particularly on the right (Morrison, 2018).
 - (d) The Dunning-Kruger effect suggests that people are uncritical about their own abilities and uncritical of their lack of critical thinking. To put it simply, people of poor intelligence lack the intelligence to recognize their impaired critical thinking ability (Dunning–Kruger effect, 2017).
 - (e) Once acquired, false information is hard to dispel.

- (f) Agnotology is a specialized technique for spreading misinformation that makes information seekers more doubtful of views or information that they already hold (Agnotology, 2016).

(11) Addiction to tribal identity politics

Wilson (1983) notes several properties of cognitive authority: (1) Cognitive authority is related to credibility. A person who has cognitive authority on a particular subject is regarded as a credible source for that topic. A friend who has installed many computer networks for friends and colleagues can be a cognitive authority on the subject of network installation. Wilson writes that credibility consists primarily of “competence and trustworthiness” (p.13). For example, I trust my competent friend to instruct me properly on how to install a network in my home. (2) Cognitive authority exists on a continuum. A person may know a lot or a little about a subject. For example, a person who has worked on network installation in a professional environment has more expertise than someone who had only done it for friends. Wilson notes that some cognitive authorities have so much knowledge that they become arbiters of settled opinion on a subject (p. 18). Newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* once played that role, perhaps less so today than in the past, given the growth of social media. Unfortunately, a steady campaign of false allegations about the reliability of their content has chipped away at many people’s faith in these authorities. (3) Cognitive authority exists in relation to a sphere of interest. These spheres can be well-defined or ill-defined: an expert on the orchestral recordings of Beethoven has a different authority than a general expert in classical music. (4) Cognitive authority involves at least two people. One can have cognitive authority without being a recognized expert. A person who has worked as a science journalist for a reputable publication has less cognitive authority than a doctor, who may have less cognitive authority than a medical researcher. A person may become a cognitive authority for a specific person or set of persons for a specific topic or set of topics. For example, we may have friends we ask for their book reviews because we share their taste and trust their judgment, but our friends are not professional book critics. (5) There are brands of expertise not related to knowledge, expertise that may not justify the qualification of cognitive authority.

Cognitive authorities can be friends, colleagues, peers, news media, Internet blogs, twitter feeds, news channels, social media sites such as Instagram, etc. For the purposes of developing this research to include such institutions as news media and news organizations, I have extended Wilson’s original view.

In order to provide a focus for this issue, we will take two cable news channels, that of MSNBC and Fox News. Both are cognitive authorities for those that access them. The measure of one’s commitment to them can be gauged in terms of loyalty. The results of the Pew Research study show the diversity of media in play, the variety among news consumers, and their differing levels of loyalty to diverse media. Older Americans are more attached to traditional media and television (Mitchell, Barthel, Shearer, & Gottfried, 2016). MSNBC and Fox News exhibit comparable levels of bias: on a scale of extreme left, left, left center, least biased, right center, right, extreme right, Media Bias/Fact Check rates MSNBC as “left” and Fox News as “right” (MSNBC, n.d.; Fox News, n.d.). The author has tried to use a case where there are legitimate comparisons and contrast. There are many cases that could be discussed, but the ones chosen seemed to be the most comparable and accessible for the purposes of this lesson.

With respect to news channels such as MSNBC, trustworthiness implies that reporting is based on evidence or facts. If there is a question, it can be traced back to sources of evidence or facts, as they are known at the time of reporting. Factual reporting means that the disclosure of truth may be progressive or even regressive. The first details of an event may be sketchy, if not incorrect, and what matters is that

the reporting is consonant with the latest details of an event and that it is faithful to the evidence. MSNBC primarily relies on NBC reporters for their news, and while their factual rating is mixed, that is due to MSNBC's use of political pundits. Reliable cognitive authorities only change the facts they report if they actually change. When they discover errors in their reporting, they make corrections (MSNBC, n.d.). While experts are used, they appear to make appropriate assessments and judgments based on their experience and knowledge. However, many liberals may fall into self-deceptive and collective self-deceptive practices, if they accept MSNBC assessments without independently verifying the basis of such assessments or their integration into their current state of understanding (beyond confirmation bias). Fox News, like MSNBC, claims to be trustworthy and have expertise. They tout a lineup of daily reporters and experts who claim to be reliable and credible. They have convinced their viewers that their position is accurate and reliable. Their only source for fact-checking tends to be limited when it is employed, the *Wall Street Journal* (Fox News, n.d.)

Their pro-Trump stories continuously report factually incorrect data. For example, Trump declared that the Mueller Report completely exonerated him, and all of Fox News and its pundits echoed that view. During the impeachment hearings, the evidence from Fiona Hill and Gordon Sondland of a factual bribery action demand from Ukraine by Trump was ignored and replaced by the President's distorted interpretation derived from a portion of Sondland's assertions, that he wanted nothing from Ukraine. However, this is not necessarily the viewpoint of all conservatives or conservative institutions. With respect to Fox News, the Mueller Report explicitly stated that the special prosecutor could not and did not exonerate the president. When reporting that a "witch hunt" had tarnished Trump's otherwise unblemished reputation, Fox News and its pundits rarely reference the large number of indictments and guilty pleas of Trump associates that resulted from the Mueller investigation. While many Americans have little trust in Fox, there are selected audiences who trust it deeply. According to a Pew Research Center survey, "Fox News was the main source [of news] for 40% of Trump voters" during the 2016 election (Mitchell, Gottfried & Barthel, 2017). Another Pew survey summarizes, "When it comes to choosing a media source for political news, conservatives orient strongly around Fox News. Nearly half of consistent conservatives (47%) name it as their main source for government and political news" (Mitchell, Matsa, Gottfried & Kiley, 2014). This number appears to have increased since his election and residence in office.

A real cognitive authority would present stories that are consistent, cohesive, and coherent over time, with few inconsistencies or reversals. This description does not apply to Fox News (Zorn, 2018). Inconsistencies abound in the network's news reporting: the diverse, inconsistent views of the president are repeated on the news without acknowledging such changes, and the conservative vision of not so many years ago seems to have disappeared as Republican leaders and administrators demonstrate a lack of moral character, a failure to implement fiscal responsibility, and, contradicting the libertarian wing of the conservative movement, increasing government intrusion in the form of the carceral state, interference with women's reproductive rights, and immigration restriction. Instead of promoting second-hand "knowledge," Fox News often promotes second-hand opinion at best, opinion that could rarely, if ever, be converted into knowledge or fact. It generally promulgates a cognitive state that can produce neither opinion, right opinion, or knowledge, but where demonstrably "false knowledge" is presented as fact or relevant data is ignored. In the impeachment hearings of Trump, they reported none of the evidence provided by credible witnesses (e.g., Alexander Vindman, Fiona Hill), about Trump's quid pro quo with Ukraine and defended Trump's characterization of the proceedings as

a Democratic hoax. When questioned about the beliefs uttered by Fox News, their viewers repeat their talking points but are generally unable to make a coherent justification of the talking points and resort to irrelevant remarks to cover their inability to defend them. This inability to defend Fox News's assertions seems to prove that what is presented by them is opinion, but it is claimed to be knowledge. Even more so, what is absorbed by the viewers is opinion, even false opinion, from which and about which there can be no justification, and often irrelevant retorts are provided: e.g., "All businessmen make deals," an assertion that ignores the wrongful nature of the deal where Trump was withholding Congress-approved national security funds from Ukraine to advance his personal interests rather than the national interests. The same could be said of MSNBC viewers if they are content to live at the surface of such second-hand "knowledge."

News media can produce assertions as "true opinions," "false opinions," or "preferential opinions." They exist as opinions in the minds of the consumers until they are verified or not or whether there are grounds for not needing to pursue their verification. As noted in the lesson on psychological factors, human beings often employ heuristics to deal with this kind of information. As Forgas and Baumeister note, "When we are exposed to salient, frequent, and thus easily remembered information," such as occurs on Fox News or the *New York Times*, this information will be regarded as "true, reliable and valid" (p. 9). Unfortunately, "These mental shortcuts exacerbate the human inability to see the world as it really is" (p. 9). The use of such shortcuts can be true of those who are either conservatives or liberals or political actors of another stripe. These are reinforced by endorsement or repetition through social media, colleagues, peers, political and religious leaders, news pundits, etc.

Consumers of news media hear content from Fox News or MSNBC and may absorb the provided opinions as second-hand knowledge. This regular consumption may result in a heuristic, to trust this source, regardless of its actual basis in truth or evidence. Such consumption may amount to confirmation bias unless the consumer can verify the produced assertions in facts, evidence, or reason or have grounds for accepting second-hand knowledge without pursuing verification. In the latter case, consumers may be quite knowledgeable about the provided information and its sources and accept it as an information processing heuristic. Unfortunately, the same can be said of those who ingest false information from a company that claims cognitive authority. The ultimate determination of whether a cognitive authority is genuine or false is not a measure of consumer loyalty, but whether their posted content *can* be ultimately authenticated and verified or coalesces with the consumer's verifiable knowledge or expertise. We must strive to be vigilant and critical of our comfortable heuristics. The problem is that many disinformation consumers are unwilling to do the work of authentication and choose to acquiesce to their confirmation bias and to their self-deception and collective self-deception. The same can be said to a lesser degree of information consumers that have a long history with an information source that appears to be consistently reliable, accurate, trustworthy, and committed to acknowledging errors or repealing stories that lack any foundation. There are grounds for the acquiescence to information heuristics for credible cognitive authorities that do not exist for discreditable ones, though for the disinformed, they might appear to be the same.

What makes fake news consumers and disseminators work so well are what can be called accelerators or enhancers, many of which are traceable to the psychological mechanisms of gullibility mentioned in the last lesson. Many fake news consumers are preconditioned by the psychological factors enumerated in the lesson above, such motivations as prejudice, resentment, greed, power, etc. A study entitled "Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news" reported that repeating

information, true or not, increases its believability, and this applies to newspaper headlines, statements, or speeches (Pennycook, Cannon & Rand, 2018). This research is reinforced by “echo chambers,” defined by Törnberg (2018) as “online social media groups that reinforce perspectives and enable confirmation bias.” See also social mechanisms of gullibility in the last lesson. There are “bubble filters” or propaganda feedback loops through self-selected information channels that reinforce biased content, particularly on the right (Morrison, 2018).

There is also the Dunning-Kruger effect that suggests that people are uncritical about their own abilities and uncritical of their lack of critical thinking. That is, people of poor intelligence lack the intelligence to recognize it (Dunning–Kruger effect, 2017). This effect seemed to be further verified by a study by De Keersmaecker & Roets (2017) that indicated that the first impressions of fake news cannot be corrected by showing that the information was incorrect, especially in those with lower cognitive abilities, who tend not have the cognitive ability to be flexible in their attitudes. Even after learning that the original information was incorrect, it has a persevering negative influence on their social impressions. This approach is also supported by overbelief in the self, articulated in the previous lesson.

Once acquired, false information is hard to dispel. David Rapp's research on memory and learning reveals that our brains retain information without retaining its source, and therefore, we do not recall a key fact about its validity. He also finds that it is difficult to remember that the information we had previously believed is false (Waters and Hargadon, 2017). This research is echoed in the psychological mechanism of epistemological failures to monitor and correct, seen in the previous lesson. There is a lingering effect that shows up, for example, in the Fox News' propagation of false conspiracy theories or in the publication of a medical report that incorrectly ties a list of problems, like autism, to children.

Finally, Robert N. Proctor coined a word for the study of culturally-induced ignorance or doubt, agnotology. He identified a specialized technique for spreading misinformation that makes information seekers more doubtful of views or information that they already hold (Agnotology, 2016). By way of example, Proctor described the tobacco industry's use of advertising to generate doubt that smoking causes cancer or other illnesses. Climate change deniers, proponents of fracking, pesticide manufacturers, and opponents of allegedly “fake news” use a similar approach. The echoing of Trump's attacks on the justice department, the FBI, the Democratic party, and other intelligence agencies on Fox News and alt-right social media play the same role.

All these factors seem to reflect Tobin Smith's understanding of Fox News programming as fostering an addictive process, mentioned in the lesson on Psychological Factors, based in addictive anger and resentment, that is played and replayed over and over again, and validated by a chosen-in-bad-faith, restrictive environment (i.e., their filter bubble) in which Fox News viewers live and dwell (i.e., peers, friends, political associates, religious affiliates, social media sources, etc., that reinforce their confirmation biases). He calls it an addiction to “tribal partisan pornography” (Smith, 2019, pp. 460-465). Undoubtedly, there is a form of addiction to left-wing news adherents; that, too, is based in anger and resentment but of a different sort. The source of their bias may be indignation and a concern for truth and respect for professionalism in the political sphere, not to mention that their views may be sourced in and likely verifiable in evidence and facts.

Exercise suggestions will call on participants to consider the following questions:

- (1) Who or what are some of your cognitive authorities? How do you evaluate their credibility, trustworthiness, and competence?
- (2) What are your favorite news sources? Are they biased? If biased, do they report facts and evidence impartially? Does its bias skew what is reported? Check the sources at the site Media Bias (<https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/>) for an indication of bias. How loyal are you to your sources that may be biased? See also Media bias chart which places various news sources on a chart: <https://www.adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/?v=402f03a963ba>
- (3) When you tune into your favorite news source, what kind of opinions does it assert (“true opinions,” “false opinions,” or “preferential opinions”)? How do you sort them out? Can you convert what might be considered a true opinion into some form of knowledge? How? What do you do about false opinions or preferential opinions?
- (4) Can you name some occasions where news sources made assertions that you took as confirmation of something you already believe?
- (5) Discuss cases a genuine cognitive authority and a false cognitive authority, paralleling the comparison and contrast of MSNBC and Fox News. How do you make that evaluation? How does the false cognitive authority enhance “credibility” though one or more of the accelerators or enhancers? How have their promoted credibility through social self-deception or collective self-deception?
- (6) Can you find occurrences of collective self-deception? What cognitive authority or authorities facilitate that self-deception? What are the enhancers for such collective self-deception? Consider the white evangelical view that Trump was appointed by God in the manner of King Cyrus or that the United States is a Christian nation whose governmental agencies should conform to Christian precepts or that the United States is a nation founded for and run by white people.