

# Cognitive Authority, Expertise, and the Conspiracist Mindset

Using Ideas from Patrick Wilson and Anthony Giddens to Analyze QAnon

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# Overview

- Patrick Wilson's concept of cognitive authority
- Anthony Giddens' discussion of the “post-traditional” society and individuals' relation to expertise
- Wilson and Giddens' ideas and QAnon

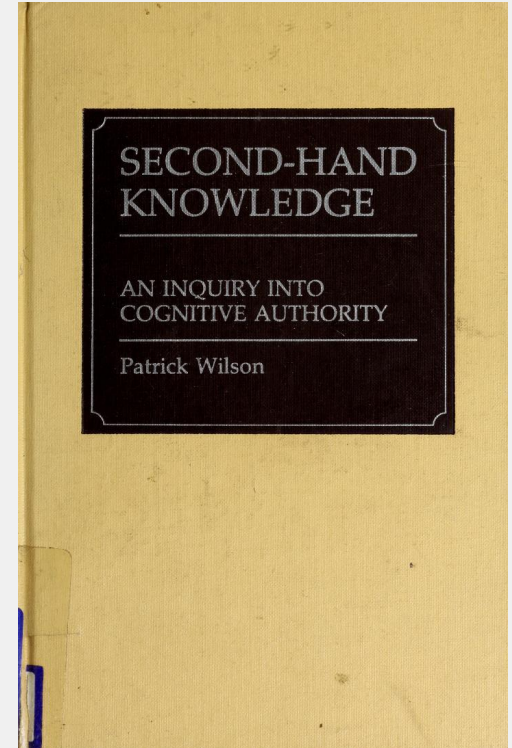
# Patrick Wilson (1927-2003)

- Librarian and philosopher.
- Professor at UC Berkeley and Dean of the library school there.
- Earlier in his career, Wilson taught philosophy at UCLA.
- Known (within librarianship) for 3 books: *Two Kinds of Power: An Essay on Bibliographical Control* (1968), *Public Knowledge, Private Ignorance: Toward a Library and Information Policy* (1977), and ***Second-Hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority* (1983).**\*
- Majorly interested in social epistemology.



(Ed Kirwan Graphic Arts, n.d.)

\*Available on the Internet Archive to [borrow](#) with an account if anyone is interested!



# Patrick Wilson's *Second-Hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority* (1983)

## Definition of Cognitive Authority (or Epistemic Authority)

- “[C]ognitive authority is a kind of influence. Those who are my cognitive authorities are among those who influence my thinking” (p. 14).
- “Cognitive authority is influence on one’s thoughts that one would consciously recognize as proper” (p. 15)
- An intersubjective relationship: “authority is a relationship involving at least two people. No one can be an authority all by himself [sic]; there has to be someone else for whom he [sic] is an authority” (p. 13).
- Related to but notably **different** from expertise: “Having authority is thus different from being an expert, for one can be an expert even though no one else realizes or recognizes that one is, and even if one were the last person on earth.” (pp. 13-14)

## Definition of Cognitive Authority (or Epistemic Authority)

- A matter of degree: “We do trust others in varying degrees; we rely more or less heavily on other people as sources of information and advice” (p. 19).
- Relative to a sphere of interest (possibly technocratic/exclusionary?): “On questions falling within the sphere, one speaks with authority, but on questions outside it, one may speak with no authority at all” (p. 19).
- Related to credibility: “The authority’s influence on us is thought proper because he [sic] is thought credible, worthy of belief” (p. 15).
  - Credibility has 2 main components: competence and trustworthiness.

# ACRL's *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*

## Authority Is Constructed and Contextual

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.

Experts understand that authority is a type of influence recognized or exerted within a community. Experts view authority with an attitude of informed skepticism and an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought. Experts understand the need to determine the validity of the information created by different authorities and to acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others' worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations. An understanding of this concept enables novice learners to critically examine all evidence—be it a short blog post or a peer-reviewed conference proceeding—and to ask relevant questions about origins, context, and suitability for the current information need. Thus, novice learners come to respect the expertise that authority represents while remaining skeptical of the systems that have elevated that authority and the information created by it. Experts know how to seek authoritative voices but also recognize that unlikely voices can be authoritative, depending on need. Novice learners may need to rely on basic indicators of authority, such as type of publication or author credentials, where experts recognize schools of thought or discipline-specific paradigms.

## The Authority Frame

The Association of College & Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2016) is the library profession's guiding document on information literacy instruction.

It (controversially) succeeded the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000), and attempted to bring more nuance into questions of information evaluation, particularly with its first frame on authority.

We can see Wilson's ideas' influence on how authority is discussed in this frame.

**(NB: “Expert” and “novice” are used in the *Framework* to describe learners.)**

## Cognitive Authority (or Epistemic Authority)

- Bases of Authority (pp. 21-26)
  - Occupational specialization
  - Formal education (degree or credential)
  - Reputation rule (reputation among others)
    - “Those already established as my cognitive authorities can transfer authority to another.” (p. 22)
  - Performance rule
    - “If a person can achieve striking results of whatever kind in some area of life, then he [sic] must have whatever knowledge it takes to do this and is deserving of being recognized as a cognitive authority in that area.” (p. 23)
  - Plausibility test
    - “Authority can be justified simply on the ground that one finds the views of an individual intrinsically plausible, convincing, or persuasive.” (p. 24)

## Cognitive Authority (or Epistemic Authority)

- Bases of Authority (pp. 21-26)
  - Personal trust (Max Weber's "charismatic authority")
    - "The prophet, the hero, the saint may attract a complete personal devotion that carries with it a readiness to let the individual define his [sic] own sphere of cognitive authority." (p. 25)
    - "We need no external tests of extraordinary performance (though those may be available), no evidence of reputation (though this may in fact influence us), no credentials or degrees; the direct impression of the individual personality may be enough" (p. 25)
    - "The final appeal, to one's trust in an individual, may seem the least rational or objective but may also be recognized as the most compelling and unchallengeable—unchallengeable not because trust proves anything but because it is uncontrollable, irresistible, and so outside the realm of deliberate choice." (p. 26)



## Cognitive Authority (or Epistemic Authority)

- Authority and Expertise (pp. 26-30)
  - The terms expert and authority are often used interchangeably, but are not the same for Wilson!
    - He gives an example of an “expert” in astrology
  - “Not only are there brands of expertise no longer regarded as corresponding to any real knowledge; there are **numerous instances of competing brands of expertise all claiming authority in the same sphere, and the question arises which brand, if any of them, is the right brand of expertise to warrant cognitive authority** [emphasis added].” (p. 27)
  - “Outsiders—generalists and specialists acting as generalists—have to evaluate insiders’ claims, deciding where expertise warrants recognition of cognitive authority and where it does not” (p. 176)

## Anthony Giddens' "Living in a Post-Traditional Society" (1994)

- In this text, Giddens is attempting to track a shift from what he terms "traditional" societies to "post-traditional" societies as part of globalization, and, concomitantly, individuals' relation to knowledge as part of this shift.
- As part of this shift, individuals become increasingly reliant on incredibly complex and abstract systems as part of their day-to-day lives (think about taking a plane trip) and they indirectly interact with a wide array of "absent others": "people one never sees or meets but whose actions directly affect features of one's own life" (p. 89).
- Due to the complexity of modern life and individuals' desires to maintain (what Giddens terms) ontological security, we place trust in various specialized experts: "There is a fundamental sense in which the whole institutional apparatus of modernity ... depends upon potentially volatile mechanisms of trust" (p. 90).

## Key (Big) Quotes

“What seems to be a purely intellectual matter today — the fact that, shorn of formulaic truth, all claims to knowledge are corrigible (including any metastatements made about them) — has become an existential condition in modern societies. The consequences for the lay individual, as for the culture as a whole, are both liberating and disturbing. Liberating, since obeisance to a single source of authority is oppressive; anxiety-provoking, since the ground is pulled from beneath the individual's feet. Science, [Karl] Popper says, is built upon shifting sand; it has no stable grounding at all. Yet today it is not only scientific enquiry but more or less the whole of everyday life to which this metaphor applies.” (p. 87)

## Key (Big) Quotes

"Living in a world of multiple authorities ... is very consequential for all attempts to confine risk ... ***For since there are no super-experts to turn to, risk calculation has to include the risk of which experts are consulted, or whose authority is to be taken as binding.*** [emphasis added] The debate over global warming is one among an indefinite range of examples that could be quoted. ***The very skepticism that is the driving force of expert knowledge might lead, in some contexts, or among some groups, to a disenchantment with all experts*** [emphasis added]; this is one of the lines of tension between expertise and tradition." (p. 87)

# Wilson's Ideas in relation to QAnon

- Wilson's authority vs. expertise distinction is *extremely* consequential for any analysis of a conspiracist movement like QAnon.



(Fleury, 2021)



(Fleury,  
2022;  
Udezue,  
2022)



(Boyd, 2023)

- In Wilson's list of bases of authority, personal trust is perhaps under-emphasized.
  - "The highest degree of authority is likely to be authority that is in this way self-defining, authority that extends to the question of the scope of the sphere of authority itself" (p. 20).
  - QAnon, as a conspiracist belief system, is one where authority accrues to the Q source precisely because of its anonymity and its complete lack of affiliation with legacy ("fake news") media. The Q source is completely self-defining in terms of its sphere of authority: it can speak about anything and, in doing so, becomes instantly authoritative for its followers.

# Giddens' Ideas in relation to QAnon

- The most useful idea from Giddens is this one: “The very skepticism that is the driving force of expert knowledge might lead, in some contexts, or among some groups, to a disenchantment with all experts” (p. 87).
  - This echoes Wilson’s comment about “numerous instances of competing brands of expertise all claiming authority in the same sphere” (p. 27).
- QAnon is made up of disaffected individuals registering, on an affective level, threats to their ontological security, but its adherents are disenchanted with all experts and “expertise” conceptually, and, therefore, resort to their own “research.”

Q !!mG7VJxZNCI (ID: a509ca No.4433511) 2642  
Dec 22 2018 23:36:43 (EST)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHnGFkUS\\_lc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHnGFkUS_lc)  
FAKE! FAKE! FAKE!  
The More You Know...  
Research for yourself.  
Q

>>5242466  
Read between the lines re: MSM 'LEFT'....  
Research for yourself.  
Trust yourself.  
No one 'news' location will provide unbiased content.  
#WakeUp  
#FactsMatter  
You are the news now.  
Q

>>2758706  
Think for yourself.  
Research for yourself.  
Trust yourself.  
Clickbait opinions are designed to attract reader to subscribe and/or follow and/or shape a pre-designed narrative.  
FOLLOW THE FACTS.  
SHEEP NO MORE.  
Q

Several Q “drops” [posts] admonishing followers to “Research for [themselves]” from the QAnon post archive qposts.online

### The Paranoid Reading of “Absent Others”

“The problematic nature of trust in modern social conditions is especially significant when we consider abstract systems themselves, rather than only their ‘representatives.’ Trust in a multiplicity of abstract systems is a necessary part of everyday life today, whether or not this is consciously acknowledged by the individuals concerned ... **The disembedded characteristics of abstract systems mean constant interaction with ‘absent others’ — people one never sees or meets but whose actions directly affect features of one’s own life** [emphasis added]. Given the divided and contested character of expertise, the creation of stable abstract systems is a fraught endeavour. Some types of abstract system have become so much a part of people’s lives that, at any one time, they appear to have a rock-like solidity akin to established tradition; yet they are vulnerable to the collapse of generalized trust.” (pp. 89-90)

- Compare with QAnon’s suspicion of the Satanic cabal of global elites

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