

How Library Stuff Works Videos: Authority is Constructed and Contextual

On January 21 2017, people around the world came together in women's marches to protest of the inauguration of Donald Trump who has a history of making misogynistic remarks. You want to write about this in your upcoming research paper, yet are having some trouble finding scholarly resources because the march happened so recently and they can take a long time to be written and published. So where else can you go for information with authority?

To answer this, we first need to talk about what authority is. The Association of College and Research Libraries defines authority as "a type of influence recognized or exerted within a community". So for example, in feminist scholarship, we have people like bell hooks who have published influential works and are considered to have authority on the topics that they write about. Likewise, we may also assume the government is a source of authority. You have probably relied on government reports or statistics in your research, because you have felt confident in their accuracy and validity. Yet, gauging authority is not always that straightforward. How does our view of governmental authority change when the US government is disseminating information like this:

"This was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration period."

Which is clearly untrue and then justifying it with this:

"You're saying it's a falsehood and they're giving, Sean Spicer our press secretary gave alternative facts to that."

So what should we do? First, we need to stop thinking that only people with PhDs or fancy titles can act as sources of authority. Instead, we need to approach all information sources critically with questions such as: Who created this? What are their credentials? Why did they create this? What evidence are they providing to support their claims? What bias is present? What is my bias? What are the strengths and limitations to the medium in which this information is being presented? Are there other competing perspectives that I can explore? This may seem like a lot of questions to ask, and I haven't even covered them all. Critically analyzing and questioning authority does take effort. But, this is energy well spent if it means we are able to accumulate the best, most well-rounded, accurate and reliable set of resources on our topic.

Oh and one more thing, we need to remember that authority is contextual. So just because somebody has authority in one area:

"My name is Donald Trump and I'm the largest real estate developer in New York"

doesn't mean that they are an authority on everything:

"On this birther issue after the state of Hawaii formally says this is the legitimate birth certificate. He was born in Hawaii. Why are you going through all of this Don?"

"Well a lot of people don't agree with that birth certificate a lot of people do not think it's authentic."

"But if the state of Hawaii authorizes it."

For more information on how Authority is Constructed and Contextual, and how it effects your

research explore the resources in the description below