



Authenticity, performativity, and contextuality

Tyler Youngman

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47989/ir31ISIC65294>

Abstract

Introduction. What does authenticity mean in an era of disruptive technological change, decaying public trust, and cultural contestation? In response, this philosophical investigation reframes authenticity through the lenses of performativity and contextuality.

Method. Conceptual analysis is undertaken to comparatively examine multidisciplinary definitions, implicit ontological assumptions, and emergent theoretical intersections between authenticity, performativity, and contextuality.

Analysis. Investigating authenticity through the lenses of performativity and contextuality positions the designation of *authentic* as an act undertaken by empowered agents to perceive, evince, or assess the cultural authority of knowledge conveyed through documents (i.e., records, events, experiences) within a co-constructed context.

Results. The synthesised documentalist view of *authenticity*, as a context-mediated performance, reframes the status of *authentic* as an intersubjective assessment of identity-relevance around and about documents, rather than as an innate or static informational quality within documents. Hence, two emergent forms of authenticity are proposed to account for the social experience and internal affect of information, respectively: *Exo-Authenticity* (i.e. information *being* authentic), and *Emo-Authenticity* (i.e. information *feeling* authentic).

Conclusion. Guiding questions about authenticity are posed to suggest future critical research directions within library and information science (LIS), emphasising epistemic vigilance toward when, where, why, and for whom concerns around authenticity matter.

Introduction

What is *authenticity*? Consider the following etymological deconstruction: 1) the prefix *aut-* denotes a creator, author, or originator of information, 2) the suffix *-ent* denotes the presence of an action or agent, 3) the suffixes *-ic* and *-ity* denotes a status or condition, that is, quality. Reconstructed, *authenticity* appears to encompass agential assessments of informational quality. Yet these morphemes echo components of provenance and relevance previously established in the literature of library and information science (LIS). Conceptual ambiguity about and around *authenticity* within LIS warrants clarification and renewed definitory discussions.

In response, this philosophical investigation reframes *authenticity* through the lenses of performativity and contextuality to articulate new directions for critical-cultural LIS research. Interrogating authenticity is essential when considering issues of decaying public trust in information sources (Youngman and Patin, 2024) and the uncritical popular adoption of generative artificial intelligence systems placing a harmful onus upon individuals for the harms inflicted by information systems enabling the proliferation of 'inauthentic' information (Wagner and Blewer, 2019; Youngman et al., 2023; Slater, 2025).

Authenticity

Handler (1986) views authenticity as 'a function of a Western ontology', an individualistic cultural construction positioning cultural experiences as something to be consumed because of their 'unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched and traditional' status (p.2). Indeed, authenticity is an 'evaluative concept, however methodical and value-free many of the methods for establishing it may be' (Van Leeuwen, 2001, p.392). Authenticity extends beyond qualities like 'age, provenance, [or] authorship' used to certify 'origin or authorship' and avoid status as 'imitation or copy' (Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 392). Rather, authenticity is often evaluated when we perceive entities as being 'faithful reconstruction[s] or representation[s]', 'authorized', or 'thought to be true to the essence of something' (Van Leeuwen, 2001, pp. 392-393).

For Tatsuki (2006), *authenticity* evokes 'genuineness, realness, truthfulness, validity, reliability, undisputed credibility, and legitimacy' (p.1). MacNeil and Mak (2007) claim authenticity functions 'as a social construction that has been put into place to achieve a particular aim. Its structures and goals vary from one field to the next and from one age to another' (p.26). They articulate three categories of authenticity (p.26) broadly related to originality (provenance), self-actualisation (belonging), and trustworthiness (factuality). Newman and Smith's (2016) adjacent taxonomy positions authenticity not as an inherent status, but a relative axis 'capturing dimensions of truth or verification' (p.610) through which 'people reason about objects, other people, and themselves' (p.609).

Individually, authenticity reflects a 'commitment to self-values' (Erickson, 1995, p.121) and 'plays a key role in the pleasure that people derive from a variety of experiences' (Newman, 2019, p.8). Authentic experiences are 'something that is mine, that belongs to me, that is my own, that is part of my ownmost (inner) self' (Scannell, 2001, p. 405), and are well-documented in studies of narrative (Doležel, 1980), student perceptions of teachers (De Bruyckere and Kirschner, 2017), well-being (Baker et al., 2017), nursing (Starr, 2008), personal development and transformation (Tou et al., 2015; Gorichanaz, 2019; Ruthven, 2025), and retail (Lee et al., 2019). Notably, authenticity is a long-debated concern in cultural heritage and tourism studies (Cohen, 1988; The NARA Document on Authenticity, 1994; Urry, 1995; Gable and Handler, 1996; DeLyser, 1999; Belhassen and Caton, 2006; Jerome, 2008; Silverman, 2015), specifically in regard to commoditisation: 'Theories of authenticity, as developed over the past 40 years, have accompanied the rapid expansion in tourism and activities designed for the tourist to consume' (Kidd, 2011, p. 24). For cultural heritage, authenticity provides 'a more subtle and useful aid to meaning making' (Kidd, 2011, p. 26).

Performativity

Performativity considers how language and action mediate social reality: 'Agency is the capability or potential for action [...] the capability or potential to take performative action'. (Hauser, 2023, p. 4). Performative analysis destabilises 'delimited understandings' and 'metaphysical presumption[s]' about 'culturally constructed categories' and enables descriptions of 'processes that produce ontological effects' including newfound 'realities' and 'socially binding consequences' (Butler, 2010, p. 147). Performativity traces back to speech acts, a concept in philosophy of language which theorises utterances possess the function of performing an action (Austin, 1963, p. 22). Performances, therefore, are situations in which actions are taken, and these actions can change what is known or exists in the world. However, performances only bring about change under certain conditions:

The performative utterance is not exempt from all criticism: it may very well be criticized, but *in a quite different dimension from that of truth and falsity*. The performative must be issued in a situation appropriate in all respects for the act in question. If the speaker is not in the conditions required for its performance [...] then his utterance will be [...] 'unhappy'. (Austin, 1963, p. 23) [italic emphasis added]

For Austin (1963), *unhappiness* encompasses three instances in which performances fail or are unable to bring about lasting social change: breach of commitment (a violation of the performance), nullity (a voiding of a performance), abuse (an insincere performance) (p. 24). Beyond unhappiness, these outcomes are also harmful: the substitution of social action for communicative action, or mere (insincere) performance, constitutes a form of epistemic injustice (Youngman et al., 2022).

Avoiding unhappiness requires performances take place within a designated context, or, with appropriate *contextualisation* ('a situation appropriate in all respects for the act in question'). Within this situation are many conditions enabling the performance to change reality, most saliently that the performative agent ('speaker') *be empowered* in the delivery of their utterance. Likewise, far beyond binaries of true and false, or of real and fake, *justification* and *belief* function as additive dimensions through which the ontic value (realness) and epistemological value (meaning) of performances are negotiated. Any combination of disempowered agents, unmet conditions, or inappropriate situations nullifies the performance, leading any attempt to be perceived as abusive and any resulting outcomes a breach of commitment. Customs, rights, protocols, and traditions which contextualise and stage any kind of performance are imperative to avoid blurring the lines between authenticity and appropriation. Successful performances require empowerment and conditionality, together constituting *context*. Unhappiness, or *insufficient contextuality*, diminishes a performance. Austin (1963) elaborates:

If, for example, the speaker is not in a position to perform an act of that kind, or if *the object* with respect to which he purports to perform it is not *suitable for the purpose*, then he doesn't manage, *simply by issuing his utterance*, to carry out the purported act. (p.23) [italic emphasis added]

Performances possess the potential to fundamentally change *what is true* about the world. Similarly, Tarski (1944) posits truth as a relation between descriptions and the world: 'A sentence is true if it designates an existing state of affairs' (p. 15). For Austin (1979), truth encompasses 'substance', 'quality', or 'relation' depending on use (p.117), meaning *truthfulness is contextual*: 'The words taken in this sense, or if we assign to them such and such a meaning, or so interpreted or understood, *are true*' (p.119). Authenticity, in this regard, is fundamentally an assertion of truth about cultural objects and experiences. Accounting prior observations about authenticity, we may subsequently amend Tarski's (1944) formulaic representation of truth. Whereas 'X is only true, if and only if, P' (p.16), we may state *a performance is only authentic, if and only if, it is contextualised*. Context stages performance. The portrayal of (un)happiness described by Austin accordingly

corresponds with subsequent feelings of (in)authenticity a performance facilitates amongst an audience: thus, authenticity is not merely an object status, but an assessment of cultural authority undertaken by performative agents (Rubridge, 1995).

Given the situational subjectivity of truthfulness, wherein many truths can exist simultaneously or when agents derive and interpret different truths from the same sense data, Austin (1963) reminds us of the importance of looking beyond actions (the performance) to instead consider the circumstances necessary for an action to achieve a desired outcome (the staging and context of performance):

Under the heading truth what we in fact have is, not a simple quality nor a relation, not indeed *one* anything, but rather a whole dimension of criticism. [...] there is a whole lot of things to be considered and weighed up in this dimension alone – the facts, yes, but also the situation of the speaker, his purpose in speaking, his hearer, questions of precision, etc. If we are content to restrict ourselves to statements of an idiotic or ideal simplicity, we shall never succeed in disentangling the true from the just, fair, deserved, precise, exaggerated [...] What we need, it seems to me, is a new doctrine, both complete and general, of *what one is doing in saying something*. (p.33) [italic emphasis original]

Contextuality

Context, encompassing the conditions empowering performance, is a foundational concept in LIS-oriented disciplines (e.g.: Dey, 2001; Lee, 2011; Agarwal, 2022). Within documentation, context generally refers to: 1) ‘connections (and distinctions)’ between documents which mediate and maintain informational boundaries negotiated through consensus, and 2) often retain ‘specific ontological and epistemological commitments’ which shape documentary relationships (de Fremery and Buckland, 2022a, p. 1272). Documents are inherently performative: ‘in the right circumstances, certain outcomes through their presence by offering evidence of something [...] Documents evince contexts beyond their immediate presence and, conversely, contexts frame the properties and powers of documents’ (de Fremery and Buckland, 2022a, p. 1270). Semiotically, documents concurrently encompass a ‘medium[s]’, ‘message[s]’, or ‘meaning[s]’ (Furner, 2019, p.9), in that ‘any object [...] may be regarded as a document by a perceiver, whether or not its creator, if any, intended it to be a document’ (Buckland, 2017, p.429). Taylor (1995) affirms this view in relation to archives and cultural heritage: ‘[Documents] become powerful ‘signs’ in a semiotic sense, and they can move us if we can only enter fully into the context of their creation, which we endeavour to do as part of our profession’ (p.3).

Austin’s (1963) interpretation of ‘objects’ as ‘suitable for the purpose’ positions performativity as documental, insofar as contexts ‘frame the properties and powers’ of performance (p. 23). Further, performative agents as senders or receivers of information are fundamentally engaged in acts of documenting, whereby ‘something deemed significant (a document in a broad sense) is understood in some way (belief) and then that understanding is expressed in a new document’ (Buckland and de Fremery, 2024, p. 5). Logically, performances (as an event) obtain documental status through their contextual staging and perception by agents. This synthesised documentalist view of *Authenticity*, as a contextualised performance, reframes the status of ‘authentic’ as an assessment of identity-relevance, wherein collectives interrogate the capacity of documents (i.e. any given representation) to be given or taken as *real* or *genuine* for the purpose using material things and experiences of cultural value to remember and maintain their own immaterial ‘ownmost’ sense of self (Modrow and Youngman, 2023). This aligns with de Fremery and Buckland’s (2024) model of relevance and creativity, positing relevance not as a static status held by an object (i.e., *a document*), but as a dynamic *contextualised* process in which document affordances are perceived as useful for a given purpose.

To account for the meaning-making power of authenticity, *epistemantics* (Hauser and Tennis, 2019) provides a useful analytic for considering the relationship between contextuality and performativity in a manner which ‘avoid[s] viewing meaning as an inherent property’ (p. 593). Emerging from knowledge organisation, *epistemantics* posits how assessments of aboutness (i.e. meaning) of an entity are shaped by the entities which surround it (aroundness): ‘aboutness is thus not a property but a relation that arises out of interpretive acts’ (p. 592). *Epistemantics* involves ‘the posterior projection of meaning (and aboutness) onto inscriptions via interpretation. Meaning is always enacted rather than inherent’ (p.592). This is especially useful for document research: ‘the proximity (aroundness) of documents can signal potential relationships between other documents (aboutness), thus informing their co-contextual potential’ (Youngman, 2025, p.46). An *epistemic* analysis of the present issue of authenticity reveals performativity as a mode of ‘aboutness’ and contextuality as a mode of ‘aroundness’. A context-mediated performance (wherein performances only take effect under specific conditions) suggests aboutness relies on aroundness, that is: meaning depends on the circumstances of perception, function, and (re)use. Conversely, aroundness is only determinable through former iterations of meaning, that is, what an entity is about or represents: ‘The meaning of a term is impossible to analyze prior to a contextualized account of use’ (Hauser and Tennis, 2019, p. 593). Authenticity is never an objectively inherent property of documents or a static informational quality: what counts as *authentic* is an intersubjective assessment of identity-relevance around and about documents equally dependent on the performance and context of use.

Conclusion: Forms and futures of authenticity in LIS

At the intersection of authenticity, performativity, and contextuality, this investigation reveals two salient forms of authenticity immediately useful for future research in LIS. These forms of authenticity account for the social experience (‘exo-’) and internal affect (‘emo-’) of information. *Exo-Authenticity* is the externalised assessment of information *within* the world as *being* authentic. As an experience of knowing oneself and the world (i.e. aroundness), *exo-authenticity* evokes provenance, involving an attestation or proof of the circumstances related to the relationships between documents, as is the case with *certificates of authenticity*, professional *grading* or *authentication*, or personally identifiable documents like *social security cards* or *birth certificates*. *Emo-Authenticity* is the internalised assessment of information *about* the world *feeling* authentic. As an experience of being ‘true to oneself’ (i.e. aboutness), *emo-authenticity* evokes affect and engages with personal criteria related to resonance (Ruthven, 2021) derived from a variety of cultural experiences, from listening to classical music on an antique period instrument, witnessing a tradition in its place of origin, or baking a family recipe in your kitchen from grandma’s cookbook. Importantly, the distinction between ‘exo’/‘emo’ is not meant to be a definitive dichotomy, but rather a situational lens through which to contextualise performances and locate the presence or effects of documents, agents, and systems involved in such performances.

To better understand the similarities and distinctions between these and other divergent or emergent forms of authenticity, future LIS research should consider addressing some of the following questions: What challenges do the cultural and political dynamics of copying and imitation (de Fremery and Buckland, 2022b) pose for the design of resilient information systems immune to the disruption and destabilisation of authenticity as a status imposed upon information? How do we adapt to the proliferation of artificial intelligence slop and post-truth information (Youngman and Patin, 2024) in assessing authenticity? How do we, as agents capable of assessing authenticity, engage in collectivist participatory governance over information systems which impose social control (Hauser, 2025)? How do we move beyond false binaries of real/fake or true/false to instead address ways in which certain kinds of personal ‘criteria for relevance’ are constructed and encouraged in the realm of authenticity (Hjørland, 2003)? Indeed, is there any such threshold by which relevance becomes tied to interpersonal and group identity? Who benefits and suffers from empowered assessments deeming performances as (not) being authentic for the

purposes of establishing and imposing cultural authority? In what contexts is authenticity assumed rather than designated? Understanding when, why, and for whom authenticity matters is of vital importance for cultural information worldbuilders.

Acknowledgements

I thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. Special thanks to the East Carolina University Community Archives Lab and MLS program faculty for their peer support.

About the author

Tyler Youngman (PhD, CAS, MSLIS) writes and teaches about the history and philosophy of cultural destruction, with an emphasis on the study of pastmaking: how documental artefacts, performances, and systems mediate historical truth, knowing, and becoming. Their agenda advances cultural heritage informatics and advocates for reparative bibliographic preservation practices rooted in commemorative justice. Youngman serves as an Assistant Professor in Library Science and Associate Director of the Community Archives Lab at East Carolina University. Contact: 1100 E. 5th St. Greenville, NC 27858, USA; youngmant25@ecu.edu

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