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Computer says no: understanding digital authority

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Citation

Weggemans, D. J. (2025, February 13). *Computer says no: understanding digital authority*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4180592>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

3 | AUTHORITY

What do we mean when we speak of authority? How does it function and where does it come from? The aim of this chapter is to reach a better understanding of the concept of authority. Despite it being used prolifically, there is still much confusion over what authority means. The concept of authority is pervasive and yet elusive (Bell, 1970: 190). One reason for this, as Carter (1979:1) argues, is the ambiguous use of the term. Take, for instance, the sharply diverging connotations of two adjectives associated with authority: authoritative (to indicate that something is likely to be accurate or true) and authoritarian (referring to a concentration of power and dictatorial rule). Authority is also used in very different contexts, ranging from the realm of politics to that of knowledge and from the family and education to the military and organisational life, making it difficult to pin down its exact meaning.

Generations of scholars from various backgrounds have worked to clarify the nature and workings of authority. Social psychologists have been concerned with the strong human tendency to comply with authority figures (Milgram, 1974). Political philosophers have had fierce debates regarding the perceived crisis of authority that society has been facing ever since the beginning of modernity (Arendt, 1961), and the possibilities for reconciling authority with autonomy (Raz, 1990; Wolff, 1990). And sociologists and public administration scholars owe much to Max Weber's (1919) engaging discussion of the development of modern bureaucratic organisations and the subsequent shift from the ideal types of traditional and charismatic types of authority to that of rational-legal authority.

In both scholarly and public discussions authority tends to be "thingified". That is, authority is often depicted as a substance that is simply possessed by certain people who use it to influence others. I consider this ontological presumption to be unsatisfying as it excludes the interactional dynamics through which authority is constructed - and deconstructed. As sociologist Richard Sennett concluded: "authority is not a thing. It is an interpretive process which seeks for itself the solidity of a thing" (1981:19). I argue here that authority cannot be reduced to detached people, institutions, or *digital things*. This chapter presents a layered understanding of authority as an asymmetrical relationship (paragraph 3.3) that is essentially situational (paragraph 3.4) and contextualised by culture (paragraph

3.5). Based on these insights, at the end of this chapter, a general idea of digital authority is introduced. The last paragraph summarizes the main conclusions of part 1. But let us first begin with the word authority itself, at its etymological roots (paragraph 3.1).

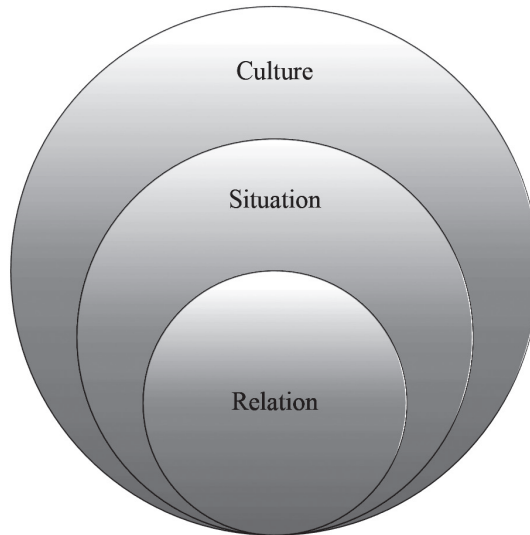


Figure 3: The construction of authority

3.1 AUCTORITAS AND AUTHORITY

Today, the meaning of authority has become blurred. For one thing, this is because the term is often used interchangeably with power. For example, saying that someone has “the power to do something” often means the same thing as saying that this person has the “authority to do it”. But as is discussed later, there are important differences between power in its coercive sense and authority. An initial step to re-establishing some of these nuances is returning to authority’s etymological roots.

The word authority is derived from the Latin *auctoritas*, a significant term in various spheres in ancient Rome ranging from family life to politics to economical transactions. While this demonstrates its importance throughout Roman society, the frequency and various functions of the term also make it notoriously difficult to define, as Grant has put it (1969: 443). The noun *auctor* is at the root of *auctoritas*. Like the English *author*, an *auctor* is an originator - someone who creates, inspires, invents, promotes, or produces something (Watt, 1982: 11; Friedman, 1990: 74-6). Examples of people who were called an *auctor* were parents, ancestors, and givers of advice. It is said that their role of creator indicates special access to, or some form of power over an object and were thus regarded as superior actors

(Pruitt, 2011: 23). *Auctoritas* and *auctor* are also linked with the lost verb *augere*, meaning to initiate, to augment, to enrich or to increase (Arendt, 1961: 121-2; Furedi, 2013: 61). In a family, for instance, the oldest known forefather - the founder - was called its *auctor*, and his *auctoritas* was inherited by his descendants. Each generation augmented and increased what the initial founder had begun (Watt, 1982: 11-2). In a similar vein, Rome itself was also considered having an *auctor*. Watt argues that it was the foundational act of Romulus that “was the source of the civil *auctoritas* of those who, in unbroken succession, were to share his work as an *auctor* in time to come, by augmenting the Roman inheritance which in their turn they passed on to their successors” (ibid).

In political life of republican Rome, *auctoritas* did not encompass a formal right to rule. On the contrary, it was directly contrasted with *potestas* (related to the English word power) and *imperium* (military power) - the formal rights of magistrates to issue lawful and legally enforceable commands (Watt, 1982: 12). The Roman Senate, however, did not have such a formal right to demand obedience, they only had *auctoritas*. It could not issue commands backed by the force of law. In fact, the Senate did not command at all, but only provided civil officials with executive powers with (authoritative) advice. As April Carter observed, the Senate could, for example, call for a respectful hearing and because of the collective *auctoritas* of its members, “the popular assembly would usually do what the Senate urged” (1979: 17). Thus, while the Senate had no executive power on its own, its deliberations and advice often did make public policy. Krieger elaborates that while the Senate was “just an advisory body [of] fathers or elders” with neither legal status or compulsory force but only *auctoritas*, it was, in fact, the Senate that “bound the Roman citizens to compliance far more definitively and extensively than did the other offices of the republic” (1977: 25). In an attempt to capture the Senate’s *auctoritas* Carl Friedrich described it as “advice which cannot be safely disregarded”. (1972: 47) and Mommsen (1887 c.f. Arendt 1961: 123) as being “more than advice and less than command; an advice one may not safely ignore”.

Unlike the formal powers vested in the office or position of a magistrate, the scope of *auctoritas* in the political sphere was not clearly defined. According to Wirszubsi (1950) the fact that *auctoritas* was not constrained by formal limits had far-reaching practical implications. He writes that, “whereas *potestas* is confined within certain limits, there is, at least in theory, no limit to the scope of *auctoritas*: it can be brought to bear on any matter” (c.f. Furedi, 2013: 63). The promise of a claim to such far reaching influence, Frank Furedi concludes, made that many leading Romans vigorously promoted their *auctoritas* (ibid). The best example is the first Emperor of Rome, Augustus, who tried to legitimise his hegemonic rule by referring to his supreme *auctoritas*. In *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (“The Deeds of the Devine Augustus”), a document Augustus wrote at the end of his reign, he says:

“In my sixth and seventh consulships [28-27 BC], after I had extinguished civil wars, and at a time when with universal consent I was in complete control of affairs, I transferred the republic from my power to the dominion of the senate and people of Rome. For this service of mine I was named Augustus by decree of the Senate, and the doorposts of my house were publicly wreathed with bay leaves and a civic crown was fixed over my door and a golden shield was set in the Curia Julia, which, as attested by the inscription thereon, was given me by the Senate and people of Rome on account of my courage, clemency, justice, and piety. After this time, I excelled all in influence [*auctoritas*], although I possessed no more official power [*potestas*] than others who were my colleagues in the several magistracies.”⁵²

Augustus, self-consciously, contrasted his claim to influence with the formal office and legal powers that both he and his colleagues in the magistracies possessed. *Auctoritas*, in this sense, represented a claim to something more than the office of leadership, Furedi concludes (2013: 63). Augustus understood that such a claim was difficult to dispute and that *auctoritas* was “the kind of substance on which real influence [was] based” (Galinsky, 1996: 15).

Again, the Roman use of *auctoritas* encompassed a much wider scope than that of politics. Among other things, the term also referred to the more general communicative quality of individuals who “spoke with authority” or were thought of as “moral authorities” (Furedi, 2013: 6). The old and the wise and those with an extensive record of achievement were attributed *auctoritas*. Cicero, for example, spoke of the “*auctoritas* of old age” (Galinsky, 1996: 16). Those who possessed such a quality were entitled to speak and to be heard. Similarly, knowledge (*scientia*) itself was also said to have *auctoritas*. And *auctoritas* was attributed to priests, bishops and to the Roman gods themselves.

Furedi writes that *auctoritas* initially functioned as a (pre-political) term which expressed “the capacity to hold responsibility for a variety of relationships and transactions” (Furedi, 2013: 61). *Auctoritas tutoris*, for example, refers to the pronouncements of a trustee or guardian, *Auctoritas patris* to the approval by the head of the family (*pater familias*) and *auctoritas venditoris* was called upon as guarantee for the closing of contracts and important sales (Krieger, 1977: 258-9). In this context, *auctoritas* encompassed communications that would move things forward.

Auctoritas has been labelled as the key to capture the distinct nature of authority (Peters, 1958: 210). Yet, as illustrated here, its many different shades of meaning complicate the construction of a strict definition. What can be concluded, however, is that *auctoritas*, in its many forms, always includes a claim to respect, trust and esteem that exerts a compelling influence on others, but remains distinct from force (Furedi, 2013: 62). With *auctoritas*, whatever an actor says or does, is taken to be right and to be listened to.

3.2 CONSEQUENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS

Contemporary usage of the term authority is perhaps as fuzzy and ambiguous as its Latin original. A useful distinction that is frequently made is between being “an authority” in the realm of knowledge (also called *epistemic* or *cognitive authority*) and being “in authority”, pointing at the office or position which formally entitles someone to make decisions about the behavior of others (Peters, 1958; Flathman, 1980; Wilson, 1983; Friedman, 1990; Pierson, 1994; Kruglanski et al., 2005). Richard De George (1985) adopts a similar division. On the one hand, he speaks of *executive authority*, referring to the exercise of authority by someone (or an institution) in the capacity of holding an official “right or power to command or act for or on someone else” – such as police officers, political leaders, and judges (De George, 1985: 22). On the other hand, he speaks of *nonexecutive authority* which does not include such an official right but does allow for the influencing of others. An example of *nonexecutive authority* is an *epistemic authority* who is thought of as having special knowledge, wisdom, or insight (e.g., an expert, a scholar, a technical specialist, a social media influencer, etc.). Furthermore, this type of authority also includes those who serve as a practical example for others (such as the artist who sets the standard for artistic practice) (ibid: 23).⁵³

To transcend these distinctions, I have found the work of Bruce Lincoln (1994) particularly helpful. He highlights that with authority, someone can bring about a discursive effect. Authorities have the capacity to produce *consequential speech*, the kind of speech that quells doubts and wins over the trust of people with whom they engage, Lincoln writes (1994: 4). The French philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel (1957) expressed a similar view, speaking of authority as “the ability of a man to get his own proposals accepted” (1957: 30-1) and theologian Austin refers to it as the “capacity to get things done” (2010: 21). While there may be differences in how people come to occupy their positions and the warrants they can produce in support of their authority, Lincoln argues, what all authorities share is that they can perform consequential speech acts - therewith also connecting authority to auctoritas’ decisive influence discussed above. As an example, he points at the words of executive authority in its most extreme form - that of military command - which generates automatic and unquestioning obedience, in the same way as the utterances of an epistemic authority will move a debate beyond dispute (Lincoln, 1994: 4).

It makes sense to expand this view beyond the medium of language. Authorities do not always need words to yield results. In fact, a disapproving glance, a sigh, or a benevolent nod can work just as well. Hence, I would rather speak of authorities’ capacity to produce consequential *communications* – communications that motivate an audience to respond in a way that signifies acceptance. Following Lincoln, I take the consequentiality of such authoritative communications not so much to depend on what is communicated or on how it is communicated. Authorities do not necessarily need to express themselves particularly well to gain compliance. Neither does this automatically flow from individual qualities such as office, wealth, ancestry, or charisma. Instead, Lincoln says, authority is a relational outcome,

grounded in a perceived or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between an actor and his audience that secures attention and produces attitudes such as trust, confidence, respect and even reverence – or the willingness of people to pretend this were the case (Lincoln, 1994:4). When people recognise this relational asymmetry - whether through notions of legitimate institutional representation or through demonstrated exceptional characteristics inspiring trust and respect - they are inclined to adhere what is communicated to them. In the following paragraphs I further substantiate this by making explicit three fundamental premises that form a framework for the further analysis of authority.

3.3 AUTHORITY IS RELATIONAL

Authority is not an intrinsic quality. It is not first “possessed” by someone and then “used” – even though we tend to conveniently put it this way. We often speak of someone – or as explored in this book, of something – *having* authority, but we cannot capture authority in this material sense. Authority is relational. It only comes to exist when we enter a relation. When there is no one to listen, there is no authority. Just like there is no authority when there is no one who speaks or communicates in some other way. There is only authority when a speaker is listened to, and an audience is spoken to (Bingham, 2008: 9).

As mentioned above, authority implies an asymmetrical relationship, in which one is recognised by the other(s) as, in some sense, a superior, not an equal. It is this asymmetry that is constitutive of the capacity to produce communications that are adhered to. Because of authority’s discursive and asymmetrical character, it is often associated with two other forms of influence: persuasion, and coercion – the processes in which someone is convinced or forced to do or believe something (Lincoln, 1994: 5). But, as many scholars who have tried to capture the nature of authority have argued, authority remains distinct from persuasion and coercion alike. Peters, for example, writes that authority applies to those situations in which “conformity is brought about without recourse to force, bribes, incentives or propaganda and without a lot of argument and discussion” (1958: 218). Authorities can compel obedience that is simultaneously free and unquestioned (Arendt, 1970: 45).

With authority, there is no need to persuade or coerce to make someone think or act in a certain way. Take the simple example of a mother telling her son to do a chore. With authority, the son will do what he is asked to do simply because it was his mother who told him to do it. She does not need to persuade him – using all sorts of arguments to convince that doing the chore has all sorts of advantages. Such rhetorical strategies presuppose a certain equality between both. Similarly, she also does not need to threaten or use force to get the child to do it.⁵⁴ The son simply follows her words. Indeed, the mother may very well be able persuade or force her son. But when there is authority, the chore will be done without her having resort to argument or force. Surely, as I have learned from personal experience, there are many instances in which children do not listen to their parents, and children’s

rooms often remain messy despite repeated requests. This can indicate the (temporary) absence of authority. Parents and other authorities can become quite preoccupied with finding appropriate responses to such challenges to remain consequential. Nevertheless, the general idea is that under the sway of authority, people will end up doing as they are told.

“Authority has the notion of acceptance built into it”, Watt writes (Watt, 1982: 30). Authority relations are recognised voluntarily by their participants. Richard Sennett captures this dynamic and speaks of authority as a “*bond* between people who are unequal” (Sennett, 1981: 10, emphasis added). And because this is the case, authorities can gain compliance without having to threaten or argue. On the contrary, Lincoln writes, the exercise of authority may rest on the “naked assertion that the identity of the speaker warrants acceptance of the speech” (Lincoln, 1994: 5). In his best-selling book, *Influence*, Robert Cialdini fittingly refers to authority as “directed deference” (Cialdini, 2007:208). When people recognise authority, it is said they are convinced in advance that whatever is communicated to them is worthy of respect and acceptance. As Friedman (1990: 64) has described it, authority relations involve some degree of surrender of judgement – when people recognise an authority, they will accept his or her communications regardless of their own examinations and evaluations.⁵⁵ The fact that an authority tells someone to do or believe something, is enough to motivate this person to follow – sometimes in an automatic or blind fashion.⁵⁶ What matters for them is not the content of what is said but rather the source - who says it. This is frequently exemplified by someone saying that he or she did something “simply because X told us” (Peters, 1958: 218).

While we must distinguish authority from the modalities of coercion and persuasion and reserve the word authority for situations of unforced and un-persuaded compliance (Watt, 19982: 29), both are also constructive elements of the asymmetry that is endemic to authority relationships (Lincoln, 1994: 5-6). Carl Friedrich, for example, has argued that authority hinges on the “capacity for reasoned elaboration” (1972: 52-5). According to this idea, it depends on the existence of good reasons for compliance and that these reasons can and will be explained by authorities when asked to do so (ibid: 55). This can also be linked to the earlier discussion of an *auctor* having “differentiated access” to something. Authorities are often perceived to have direct access to certain experiences or knowledge from which their subjects are barred (Friedman, 1990: 75).⁵⁷ In practice, it is more about individuals *believing* or *presuming* that such capacity exists. When a doctor says, “take these pills three times a day”, a common response is to follow this advice. We do so because he appears medically well-trained, and we assume he can give us elaborate reasons for his advice if asked (and circumstances permit). The doctor may be very well an imposter or a charlatan: if his patients trust that convincing reasons can be given for his utterances his authority is real in its effect. In this view, persuasion then lurks in the background of authority as a presumed possibility that can be brought forward at any time. In a similar vein, authority is related to the capacity to use force. As part of a larger hierarchal social

system, some actors are delegated special access to coercive power. This can play a role in the asymmetries between teacher and student, parent and child or soldier and officer where everyone is aware that under certain conditions - for example in the case of observed resistance - authorities have a right to use force rather than reason. Hence, the belief that under challenging conditions force will be deployed can also underpin an individuals' regard for a speaker and their willingness to accept authoritative communications.

In short, persuasion and coercion are supportive parts of authority relations, Lincoln emphasises (Lincoln, 1994: 5-6). By being present in the background, as possibilities that lead an audience to assume that there must be good reasons or dire consequences for their deferential responses, they co-shape authority's relational asymmetry. But only in a state of latency this holds true; their actualisation indicates authority's very absence (Lincoln, 1994: 6). Once authority must be self-consciously justified this relationship is suspended - at least for the time being. At those moments, when authorities might sense they are losing the trust and respect of their audience, they can become tempted to rely on coercion and persuasion. But, as Lincoln writes, when authority operates on pain and fear or through arguments, it ceases to be authority and becomes (an attempt at) persuasion or coercion, adds Lincoln (Lincoln, 1994:6). Ultimately, this can lead to the definitive deconstruction of authority. As Arendt has put it:

“A father can lose his authority either by beating his child or by starting to argue with him, that is, either by behaving to him like a tyrant or by treating him as an equal. To remain in authority requires respect for the person or the office. (1970: 45).”

3.4 AUTHORITY IS SITUATIONAL

Authority is not just relational but also grounded in the character of the situation: it is the impression conveyed to an audience in a particular setting that incites its acceptance, deference, or obedience. As such, authority always involves a theatrical element and the use of discursive practices that impose a reading of the situation on others. Authorities rely on an array of theatrical instruments to foster the right impression among their audiences. This view also aligns with Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach. Goffman writes that everyday interaction is a theatrical performance in which individuals convey and maintain impressions of themselves.⁵⁸ To influence others, people put up a “front” and present an idealised image, strategically using certain language, gestures, symbols, and the setting in which they perform (Goffman, 1959: 32-40). The things that might undermine such “frontstage” acts are carefully kept “backstage”, out of view of the audience.⁵⁹ With their performance, Goffman argues, individuals aim to express and maintain a definition of the situation – they make suggestions to others how to define what is going on and how

to respond accordingly (Goffman, 1959: 32). Authority, from this perspective, is thus not so much about solid content but about the creation and maintenance of perception. To command an audiences' trust and respect, one must make an impression that shapes (or defines) the situation as an authority situation, calling attention to the relational asymmetry that exists between the actor and the audience. This way it also ties in with Sennett's observation that authority is based on *images* of "strength and weakness" (Sennett, 1981: 4). Or as Niccolò Machiavelli famously said the prince "need not actually have all the qualities I have enumerated, but it is absolutely necessary that he seems to have them" (Machiavelli, 1513: 57).

To stage an authoritative performance, people may rely on a variety of dramaturgical practices and props. As De George writes, authority has many symbols - clues an audience may find in someone's appearance and performance which mark the authority of its bearers and function as a mental shortcut to identify authority. Sometimes these symbols are subtle, and sometimes more obvious (De George, 1985: 100-4). The classical example of such tangible symbols of authority are the uniforms and insignia of rank in the police and the armed services. Their apparel communicates authority, both within the organisation as well as to the public. Without their badges or uniforms, we would not be able to recognise them and are less likely to follow their pronouncements. This latter point is echoed in the seminal work of Leonard Bickman (1974). In a series of experiments Bickman showed how his research assistant on the street managed to ensure compliance of random pedestrians by wearing a police-style uniform. When the research assistant dressed differently - for example wearing casual clothes or a milkman uniform - compliance was much lower. Other studies also showed that the condition of a uniform and equipment can impact authority. For example, when a uniform is in a bad state people can become reluctant to obey or - as interviews with prison inmates who murdered police officers indicated (Pinizzotto & Davis, 1992) - these uniforms can even be an open invitation for resistance as they may communicate incompetence. What these and other studies illustrate is the powerful situational impact of a uniform and the way they convey the authority of the person wearing it.

Throughout history many more items have been used to designate certain people as distinguished for their office, status, or rank. Consider, for example, the crown and jewels of a king, the diplomas and awards of a scholar, the choir dress and special vehicle of the pope, the suit and tie of a corporate executive, the robes and wigs of lawyers and judges, the lab coat and stethoscope of a doctor or the chair and megaphone of a movie director. These and many other items all physically set someone off as special (De George, 1985: 102). They draw attention to the authority of their bearer in a certain situation and incite acceptance. Or as Lincoln concludes about this variety of uniforms and insignia: "insofar as a particular garment or piece of paraphernalia has come to enjoy the respect and reverence of a given audience (for whatever reasons), it focuses the attention of that audience on whomever comes to hold it, whose words will consequently be received - initially at least

- with similar respect and reverence (Lincoln, 1994: 8). Even when the bearers of these symbols of authority are not genuine these uniforms and insignia obtain for their bearers the trust of others and yield them *de facto* authority - such as illustrated by Bickman's research assistant pretending to be a cop.

Along with the tangible symbols of authority come the intangible ones. An example is the range of physical postures, characteristics, gestures, and expressions that function in concert with the visible items of authority.⁶⁰ Done at the right moment, a hand gesture, a glare, a frown, or a bow becomes a vehicle for conveying attitudes of decisiveness, trustworthiness, wisdom and thereby help to lay claim on people's attention and acceptance. To this it must be added that the relatively fixed aspects of physical appearance (e.g., racial characteristics, age, gender, size and looks) have, throughout time, also been the very reason for attitudes of distrust, envy, suspicion, doubt, wariness, and skepticism. This illustrates that authority is, in fact, dynamic, and cannot be understood in isolation from its subjects and the setting in which it operates.

Another set of intangible symbols of authority is more verbal in nature. Language plays an important role in the construction of authority. As De George argues, "the language of epistemic authorities, even when obfuscating, sometimes gains them increased respect; and the language of executive authorities, when peremptory, decisive, and insistent, frequently wins them recognition, compliance, respect and obedience" (1985: 103). The right use of language is both a symbol as well as a basis for getting and keeping authority. Every field of knowledge has a specific vocabulary, and when this vocabulary is used in a natural way it distinguishes a person as a part of an inner circle and confers authority on him or her (*ibid*). Consider, for example, the vocabulary of many corporate executives, doctors, academics, lawyers, and sports coaches. Their language frequently brings with it a certain inaccessibility. Such incomprehensibility may be perceived as a sign of expertise or knowledge from which one is barred and can be a good reason for acceptance of someone's words.

De George also discusses the role of the various forms of address and titles. The use of titles marks certain people as authorities and generates distance between those who have a title and those who do not (1985: 103). Titles can be formal such as "Professor", "General", "Priest" or "King" but can also be more informal as in "Expert" or "Specialist". The psychological importance of these titles is that when they are used, they remind us of the asymmetry - whether in knowledge or in official position - between those involved.

Certain designated times and places can also be considered symbols of authority that predispose many people to accept the words of a speaker. Lincoln gives the examples of the churches' pulpit on Sunday mornings, the lectern at the appointed hour for a (university) class, and the judge's desk when court is in session (1994: 8-9). As he explains, these times and places are authorised not only by specific institutions in which people trust (church, university, government), but also "by the memories, associations, assumptions, and

expectations they call forth in the audiences they call together” (ibid). As such, times and places confer authority on those who are allowed to perform within these privileged settings.

Last, there is the role of others in shaping authority situations. For instance, individuals such as an office director, a school principal, a head coach can draw attention to a specific actor, signaling to an audience to listen actively and show respect to whoever they introduce to the stage – whether it is a newly hired manager, a substitute teacher, or a team captain. The presence of such henchmen can be an important step for constructing authority. Or take the actions and testimonies of others in the audience. When we see or hear others relying on authority, or rejecting it, we are more likely to do this as well – the idea of *herd instinct* (De George, 1985: 97). In line with this is the idea that perceptions of competence are often co-constructed by the testimonies of others in the audience. We frequently take reputation as a ground for our preliminary attentive responses.⁶¹

The significance of signs, symbols, and the role of others for authority is often underestimated. They vary across time and place. However, their general function remains the same. They create the impression that those associated with them are worthy of trust and respect and, as a result, influence the capacity to evoke compliance. As such they are important as they invite recognition of the authoritative position of the performer from the audience (and thus the asymmetry of the relationship). Or more in Goffman’s terms, the right expressive equipment, places, and people may leave an impression on an audience that invites them to define a situation as an authority situation in which their compliance is warranted.

3.5 AUTHORITY IS CULTURAL

The view that emerges from these sections is that authority, above all, depends on the recognition and acceptance of those subject to it. Yet the audience itself is seldom a central topic of analysis. People observe, interpret, and respond in different ways to authority claims and this is strongly shaped by the set of culturally learnt values and beliefs nested in their minds. How we make sense of our world and the way we respond to the situations we encounter is co-shaped by our cultural backgrounds. When growing up, people in the same culture learn about basic assumptions, attitudes, symbols, heroes, and rituals, which together form a culturally specific meaning system (Hofstede et al., 2010; Meyer, 2024). In our interactions with others, individuals – often unconsciously – draw from this cultural repertoire of thinking to determine what is going on and what actions are deemed appropriate here.⁶² In this sense, culture is also important for shaping our definitions and ideas of authority.

Learning to recognise and respond to authorities is part of every culture. From a young age, children are taught who to trust and respect. Within the family, and at school, children learn about the benefits of listening to proclaimed authorities and of the costs of doing something else. Later, people enter public life and work organisations, acquiring

necessary information about all sorts of professional roles and practices. They are told who to listen to and whose words to accept. This way, individuals' orientations, and expectations of authority are inextricably intertwined and emanate from within cultures and social communities. The symbols, rituals, and places discussed in the previous paragraph which allow speakers to convey authority, are often visible to everyone. However, their meaning and performative powers lie in the interpretations by cultural insiders. Over the course of their lives people develop specific patterns of thinking that enable them to recognise rules and behavioral standards, the positions that are designated as authoritative and the meaning of authority symbols, rituals, and places within their cultural context. Because this learning happens constantly, and largely unconsciously, following authorities may simply become a habit.

Authorities are, thus, often a reflection of a series of culturally conditioned expectations of an audience. It is the audience that, within a given cultural context, authorises a given actor to communicate with authority. It does so based on the things it has learnt from its environment. Hence, authority can thus differ per time and place. Authority is clearly not a given, as argued above, nor is it stable and discrete (Carlson, 2017: 12). Referring back to the preceding examples, the influence of the Roman Senate dissolved by autocratic emperors, anti-vaccination campaigners and naturopaths deny the authority of medical doctors, scientists are questioned by politicians and religious fundamentalists, the military and police is openly challenged by rioters, and so on. Authority is always open to contestation and change. With changing cultural horizons, recognised authorities may be forced to do new things to maintain the trust and respect of their audience, just like new authorities may emerge. While we no longer grow up believing in magicians and sorcerers, we may now discover cultural elements in support of new authority claims – by digital technologies perhaps?

3.6 TOWARDS A THEORY OF DIGITAL AUTHORITY

There are many volumes available on authority and I do not pretend this chapter to be an exhaustive account of what has already been written. Rather than an authoritative account of authority, the previous paragraphs provide some important initial insights into its nature and dynamics. Authority broadly refers to the capacity to produce communications that are willingly accepted by others out of trust and respect or, as Lincoln (1994) has emphasised, the strategic willingness to act as if this were the case. But the term also refers to the actor who is perceived to have this capacity within a given situation. Looking across the previous sections, I take this capacity not so much to be a stable and static quality, possessed by certain actors. Rather than an entity or a thing that someone simply has or does not have, I have come to view authority a result of situated relational interactions or the “kinetic outcome of social activity” as Pruitt puts it (2011: 24).⁶³

More precisely, to understand where authority comes from and how it functions one can discern three layers; (1) the relationship between authorities and their subjects; (2) the character of the situation; and (3) the cultural context which conditions expectations and ideas of authority. In short, authority is constructed in relations, situations and within cultures. Authority implies an asymmetrical relationship that people willingly acknowledge. This experienced asymmetry hinges on inequalities of access to knowledge or latent power and secures not just individuals' attention but also their trust, respect, and acceptance. The recognition of authority's asymmetry lies vested in situations: when the many givens of a setting predispose an individual to define a situation as an authority situation in which their compliance is called for. And the culturally shaped values, orientations and expectations of people are of importance for the responses to authority claims. Table 1 below summarises this idea and forms a starting point for the rest of this book.

So far, our focus has been primarily on human authority. Apart from some passing references, not much has been written about the authority of (digital) things. Perhaps it is assumed that the concept of authority is either *a priori* confined to the human realm or that it does not need much further discussion when used synonymously for the increasing influence of modern-day technologies. The aim of this book is to further explore and develop the idea of digital authority, particularly in relation to the field of security. What I am interested in, is whether it has begun to make sense in our digitizing world to speak of digital authority, and if so under what conditions. Moving from the previous discussion that helps us understand authority generally to the specific case of digital authority begins with reiterating the definition of "digital authority":

Digital authority is the capacity of a digital technology to produce consequential communications - output that is accepted by people out of trust and respect or their willingness to act as if this were so. It also refers to the technology that is perceived to have such a capacity within a given situation.

Digital authority, like its counterpart human authority, is enacted through communicative conventions that shape situations and orient the actions of its subjects.

The following exploration of digital authority is based on the previous discussion and the framework developed here. By looking into the relationship between technologies and people, the situation they engage in and the cultural background against which their interactions take place I further investigate the extent to which digital technologies can be authorities.

3.7 CONCLUSION PART 1

The first part of this book discussed the context of digital authority. Why should we be talking about digital authority in the first place? I described the digitization of our world and the increased role of digital technologies in private and public decision-making contexts. Many decisions now result from the interactions between human decision-makers and digital technologies. Ideally, these technologies *support* cognitive processes and result in better decisions by storing and providing relevant information to a human decision-maker. However, it is found that digital output can easily become a heuristic replacement for comprehensive information seeking and evaluation: computer says no. This becomes problematic when the technology turns out to be wrong and fails to live up to people’s expectations. Against this background, I turned to the concept of authority to understand people’s blind reliance on digital technologies. Authority refers to the capacity to produce communications that are accepted out of trust, respect, or the willingness to act as if this were so. It is rooted in relations, situations and in cultures. Authority implies an asymmetrical relationship that is recognised within a given situation by a culturally conditioned subject. While much has already been said and written about authority, the authority of digital technologies has remained largely out of scope.

The next part of this book consists of three chapters and will look further into the idea of digital authority. Chapter 4 focuses on the *relationships* between technologies and humans. What does an authority relationship between a technology and human being look like? Subsequently, in chapter 5, I turn to the *situation* in which individuals may come to recognise a digital authority. In what environments would people recognise digital authority? Chapter 6 explores the *culture* of digital authority. Does today’s cultural context facilitate digital authority?

Table 1. Layers of authority

	Relation	Situation	Culture
Characteristics	Experienced asymmetry	Defining an authority situation	Expectations of authority
	Consequential communications	Impressions	Conditioned values and beliefs
	Differentiated access to knowledge and force (persuasion and coercion)	Symbols (uniforms, titles, insignia, behaviors, places, etc.)	Dynamic and open to change