

Exploring the Concept of Source Criticism: From Sweden to the United States

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In his book *Rising Out of Hatred*, journalist Eli Saslow tells the story of Derek Black, a former white nationalist who underwent an ideological transformation resulting in his publicly denouncing his beliefs. Saslow describes the secluded white nationalist community, where Derek grew up in constant exposure to white supremacist beliefs and so-called scientific proof of the ideology. Due to his total conviction and commitment to white nationalism in his early years, many assumed that Derek eventually would become the leader of the movement.

Derek's decision of going to college at New College of Florida would soon change that prediction. For the first time in his life, Derek met and interacted with a diverse group of people – some of whom protested against him and some of whom confronted him with challenging conversations about his views. New College slowly made Derek aware of how ethically unjustifiable his beliefs were, and of the falsity of the scientific reports he had relied so heavily upon. The logic of his viewpoint slowly started to crumble, which eventually resulted in his publicly renouncing his beliefs and deciding to confront the damage he had done.

As I gradually learned more about Derek Black, I was deeply surprised by the way he, before his transformation, doubtlessly believed the scientific reports that confirmed his beliefs. He was clearly a very intellectual person, so how could he not question his sources in the slightest? They must have shown serious signs of deficiency, and surely Derek must have had the necessary skill set to see that.

As my first language is Swedish, the concept I had in mind when I reflected on Derek not being critical towards his sources was the Swedish concept of *källkritik* (directly translated

into “source criticism”). According to *Nationalencyklopedin* (“The National Encyclopedia” of Sweden), the goal of *källkritik* is “ultimately to, through critical examination, try to determine whether the informative content of a source is true or false, usable or unusable for the question to which you seek an answer” (Odén and Thurén, translation mine). Source criticism can be regarded as a way of holding yourself and others accountable for what you believe, making sure that you think by yourself and create your own understanding before you decide whether to trust a source or not. The concept is interesting to explore with *Rising Out of Hatred* in mind, as Derek relied heavily on the supposed science behind white supremacy to validate his beliefs.

Interestingly, the Oxford English Dictionary describes the English compound word of “source criticism” as the “analysis and study of the sources used by the authors of the biblical text” (“Source criticism”). The Swedish concept cannot be correctly described with this definition, and so the English meaning of “source criticism” is different from *källkritik* – despite the words being literal translations.

Consequently, the translation of the concept is problematic. Rolf Torstendahl, Emeritus Professor of History at Uppsala University, suggests a “source-critical fundamentalism” exists in Sweden, distinguishing Sweden from other countries. He argues that in Sweden, a widespread opinion is that a historian is nothing more than his or her ability with source criticism. Torstendahl goes on to say that most unlike Sweden are the countries of the United Kingdom and the United States, as they do not even have a word for the Swedish source criticism (209-210). Thus, the problem of translation becomes clear – the Swedish concept of *källkritik* seems to be nonexistent in the universe of the English language. The absence of an English word for the concept surprises me enormously. It has been a fundamental part of my education in Sweden, having learned about source criticism since the age of six. The concept has taught me how to interpret the overwhelming amount of information I am exposed to every

day, and it is integrated into my way of seeing the world. It is undoubtedly one of the most valuable life lessons I have learned.

Do English-speakers have no tools for source evaluation? Actually, a few closely related concepts that have similar meanings and principles as the Swedish concept of *källkritik* exist. Perhaps by defining the following concepts, the circumstances of the original concept will emerge.

Information literacy, abbreviated IL, is defined as “the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge” (Association of College and Research Libraries 8). IL undoubtedly has similarities to the Swedish source criticism – the goal of both is to analyze sources and find reliable information. However, I would not say the two concepts are equivalents. Source criticism is not merely about having the mechanical knowledge about how to evaluate specific sources – it is a way of thinking, a critical approach towards all information around you. Therefore, IL cannot solely be a skill-based, mechanical way of evaluating information and at the same time enclose the whole concept of source criticism. Evaluating information and being information literate is rather something you do *when* you are “source-critical.”

A relatively new concept is *critical* information literacy – critical IL. As described by Eamon Tewell, Head of Research Support and Outreach for Columbia University’s Science, Engineering, and Social Sciences Libraries, critical IL is “a teaching perspective that does not focus on student acquisition of skills, as information literacy definitions and standards consistently do, and instead encourages a critical and discursive approach to information.” Critical IL is a reaction to the traditional assumptions about information literacy and represents the view that there is more to education than creating “efficient workers” (Tewell 25). Although critical IL and the Swedish concept of source criticism have developed in very different ways,

they are alike, as both urge for a critical approach towards sources. Fifteen years ago, Swedish professor Rolf Torstendahl claimed there was not a word for source criticism in the UK or the US (210). The emergence of critical IL implies that the situation has changed since then – perhaps this is the first step towards instituting the mindset of source criticism in the English-speaking countries. However, the usage of the concepts is still very different in Sweden and the United States, which represents a fundamental difference between the concepts.

The Swedish National Agency for Education, *Skolverket*, has written in their guidelines that students should be introduced to and learn about information evaluation and source criticism in preschool, at the age of six. On the website of the agency, preschool teacher Liselott Drejstam was interviewed about her work on source criticism: “If you start teaching source criticism ... in fifth grade, the students have a harder time accepting it. They might think that ‘I have always used google to find information, and it works just fine!’ It is better that they learn the proper way from the beginning.” (Källkritik i förskoleklass, translation mine). In Sweden, it is considered fundamental to incorporate the concept of source criticism early so that the children can grow and make the critical mindset their own as a natural part of growing up and maturing.

In contrast, information evaluation and critical decisions are only discussed briefly in the *AASL Standards Framework for Learners*, created for primary and secondary education in the US. Furthermore, the framework describes school librarians as “information specialists” (American Association of School Librarians). Viewing school librarians as information specialists indicates that the librarians are trusted to be better at information handling than the students, which relieves the students from a responsibility they need to shoulder themselves. Symphony Bruce, librarian at American University and former high school teacher, adds that from her experience, you must look to higher education in the US to find “people working from

a critical perspective.” And even at the higher education level, many exceptions exist. She continues to say that: “Critical mindset hasn’t been included yet for younger students.”

When comparing the Swedish source criticism with critical information evaluation, one cannot fail to notice the striking similarities. However, the influence and knownness set the concepts apart. While source criticism is fundamental in education at all levels in Sweden, critical information evaluation has a weak, if at all existent, role in *higher* education in the US. As librarian Symphony Bruce stated, younger children are not introduced to the concept. As a result, one might never come in contact with critical information evaluation in America, since not everybody will study at a university. Accordingly, the fact that the concepts of source criticism and critical IL have the same meaning is irrelevant, since they are used in widely different ways.

Source criticism needs to be introduced to everyone from a young age, no matter language or country. It should not only be regarded as a tool for academic work, which you can leave behind in school when you go home in the afternoon, but as a fundamental skill every citizen needs to use at all times. In fact, using it in school is irrelevant compared to using it in all other contexts of life, where a critical approach to sources truly can make a difference. For example, would it have made any difference if Derek Black had practiced source criticism? Would it make any difference if every white nationalist in the United States would practice source criticism? Being source-critical is not only necessary – it is our responsibility.

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