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Literacy in the Library

Contingent Identities of Information Professionals

Abstract

This paper explores how information professionals are required to have multiple professional identities in order to carry out their duties in an information space. On the one hand, librarians are guided by frameworks put in place by the ALA and other professional organizations. On the other, Paulo Freire reminds us that pedagogy must be formed with, not for, the oppressed. As neoliberal pressures continue to mount in the library, external notions of success impact internal values. Simultaneously, communities are shaped by a logic of accumulation and algorithms of oppression which comprises notions of everydayness remediated through biased processes. If a librarian is committed to social justice and acknowledges the constructedness of information systems and of individuals through these information systems, they are committed to multiple evaluative criteria, both extrinsic and intrinsic. Rather than calling these notions of success paradoxical or contradictory, queer theory suggests that these identities are contingent.

Introduction

Libraries have now fully embraced the ethos of literacy, completing the shift to outreach and instruction, especially in the university. The Association of College and Research Libraries released a major overhaul of their Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education in

2016, a framework that has been highly contested since the initial version was released in 2000, solidifying the maturity of this movement (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015). The move toward literacy has not come without some consternation among librarians, with critiques situated around "quality control" (Pawley, 2003) and "information transfer" (Elmborg, 2006). Holding true to the social values of information professionals, some librarians have resisted ideological domination (Pawley, 1998).

Pawley in the article *Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling* highlights the inherent tension in the phrase Information Literacy and the resulting bifurcation of possible outcomes. On the one hand, information literacy has the potential to empower citizens and democracy while on the other, it is a means to control the "quality" of information through literacy frameworks. Pawley likens this outcome to a "procrustean bed," conforming the learner to the criteria of the teacher through adherence to standards and therefore shaping them in accordance with the status quo. Furthermore, the concept of information literacy reifies information as commodity rather than a process, resulting in a tension between information production and consumption (2003).

In the article *Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice,* Elmborg builds off the tensions posed by Pawley and suggests critical theory as a lens for engaging with the problem of information transfer. By applying critical theory to the practice of information literacy, it is acknowledged that education is an inherently political activity and that "neutrality is not an option." In this discussion, Elmborg cites Paolo Freire, calling out the ideology of capitalism that guides American education, treating students like "consumers and passive

receivers of knowledge rather than active agents shaping their own lives." Freire suggests an alternative pedagogy that creates "critical consciousness" in students. Elmborg expands the concept of critical consciousness to the practice of literacy in the library, moving away from banking education towards democratic values (2006).

A Critical Librarianship movement among librarians followed the release of Critical Information Literacy with librarians supporting the movement under the #critlib hashtag on Twitter and on critlib.org. Critlib.org gives the following definition of critical librarianship (critlib.org, 2019):

> Critlib is short for "critical librarianship," a movement of library workers dedicated to bringing social justice principles into our work in libraries. We aim to engage in discussion about critical perspectives on library practice. Recognizing that we all work under regimes of white supremacy, capitalism, and a range of structural inequalities, how can our work as librarians intervene in and disrupt those systems?

Sarah Clark of betterlibraryleaders.com suggests that critical librarianship is first and foremost about empathy, incorporating students into the production of problem-solving and moving away from the notion of student as consumer (Clark, 2016):

> Teachers and students alike can break free of the cycle of oppression by engaging in a "problem-posing dialogue" where neither side was presumed to have a monopoly on The Truth—if such a thing even existed. Instead, all parties are assumed to possess

> knowledge that can help others think through and resolve problems, thereby becoming liberated from intellectual (and eventually, according to Freire, political) oppression.

Central to these ideas is the notion of democracy: How can information literacy be a democratic process, where teachers and students are both involved in the production and consumption of learning? Beilin explores this dialog further in the paper *Student Success and the Neoliberal University*. Troubled by the idea of success, Beilin questions how a "critical library praxis [can] encourage and support students' academic and career goals but still remain faithful to the struggle against the system of inequality and oppression that enables success" given that notions of success are narrowing as neoliberal mandates are increasingly integrated into the university. For Beilin, the issue is that of evaluating success. On the one hand, there is the idea that success is closely aligned with students as "market actors" while on the other, the commitment to social justice asks librarians to push back against neoliberal criteria of success (2016).

The remainder of this paper explores these varying notions of success and how they play out in the library, especially through information literacy. A discussion on the forms of knowledge organization systems and their relation to identity will provide an analysis on how we can think about evaluating success in information literacy. An investigation into the information systems that comprise the social and informational realities extrinsic to the library will follow, exploring the impact of logics of accumulation and algorithms of oppression on the formation of identities. This investigation will help librarians understand how library communities, or students, have formed their criteria for success. Finally, the paper will conclude with a conversation about how

librarians can incorporate these success criteria while at the same time push back against the structures that form the identities of these communities. It is suggested that the duty of the librarian is to form multiple contingent identities in line with these contradictory notions of success, a strategy informed by queer theory.

Literature Review

Knowledge Organization and Identity

Given that information literacy and in particular critical information literacy is interested in the dialectic between teacher and learner, it is important to consider the knowledge organization systems that represent and/or shape an individual or community's identity. In "Interrogating 'Identity': A Philosophical Approach to an Enduring Issue in Knowledge Organization" Furner suggests that in evaluating knowledge organization (KO) schemes it is important to understand how they "successfully reflect the cultural identities of their users." Given that KO schemes are "representations or models of reality," the question becomes "how well do KO systems *represent* identity?" The analysis of KO systems here indicate the inextricable relationship between KO schemes and identity production. This being the case, how well do KO systems represent identity given that identities are multifaceted, mixed, multidimensional, and vague (2009)?

"The challenge of KO is how to make sure that such expressions of identities are represented in KO systems in ways that serve the users of those systems" Furner notes. The "goodness" of KO systems, then, is contingent on how well they represent the communities who interface with

them. However, as KO systems are designed, the KO scheme may or may not align with those communities they wish to serve. This tension is fully apparent given the consideration of information systems that dominate the information landscape today. With biased algorithms and logics of accumulation defining how communities engage with information, the identities of communities are conflated with these information systems. This conflation has consequences on what librarians must consider when performing critical information literacy.

To better understand the information landscape that shapes the communities libraries serve, a closer look at two of the prominent features of market driven information systems is explored. A discussion of surveillance capitalism is discussed in the following section, exploring the impact of a logic of accumulation presented by Zuboff in *Big Other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization*. This is followed by a look at one feature of surveillance capitalism, *Algorithms of Oppression*, and how logics of accumulation are anything but neutral, driven instead by capital and market gains. This discussion is important when considering the implications of surveillance capitalism on the communities that use the library and how they are shaped by algorithms biased towards marketing shaped by the ruling class.

Logics of Accumulation

In *Big Other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization* Zuboff outlines a logic of accumulation that is the primary mode of contemporary capitalism. This logic of accumulation is driven by ‘big data’ in order to “predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control” in what Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism.

Critical to this argument and to future democracy is a move away from a market that has persisted under capitalism which "depended upon the emergence of new market forms" and where individuals made choices with their capital. Under surveillance capitalism, these new market forms are no longer driven by the choices of the individual, but rather drive the choices of the individual (2015).

Central to this is the understanding that the best predictions are observations. Surveillance capitalism, driven by a logic of accumulation, interventions, and 'big data,' provides a way to influence behavior and therefore increase the predictive power of the service and by extension the market. This new information civilization is what Zuboff calls Big Other where "new possibilities of subjugation are produced as this innovative institutional logic thrives on unexpected and illegible mechanisms of extraction and control that exile persons from their own behavior" (2015). As a result of Big Other, a privileged few, such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon, have access to this logic of accumulation and therefore, the ability to make decisions that fundamentally shape the market. This represents an asymmetry between those who have access to the knowledge afforded by 'big data' and those whose social and informational needs are met and influenced by these platforms.

Evidence for surveillance capitalism is seen in all corners of information instructure. From Youtube video suggestions (Schwartz, 2019) (Lewis, 2018) to journalism and the distribution of news (Staltz, 2017) (Helmore, 2019), the platforms which the information civilization uses for their information and social needs have shifted to the control of a few companies. Content not

paid for by producers, or unable to be monetized in the current marketplace, is buried under all the content that is. The effect of this process is the reification of hegemonic norms in the information sphere, whether through the information individuals receive when they search Google or the ads users see when they browse Facebook. Furthermore, as these platforms are increasingly "personalized," the information they provide users is in fact more of the same; they are the data of everydayness captured and recapitulated through the lens of marketing.

Algorithms of Oppression

An example of this asymmetry of power between information production and consumption is discussed in Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression*. While searching "black girls" on Google, Noble interrogates the bias inherent in the results, noting that "the core of my argument is the way in which Google biases search to its own economic interests - for its profitability and to bolster its market dominance at any expense." Given "Google's monopoly status, coupled with its algorithmic practices of biasing information toward the interests of the neoliberal capital and social elites of the United States" the resulting outcome is the "a provision of information that purports to be credible but is actually a reflection of advertising interests" (2018). Here the effects of surveillance capitalism are seen in action, resulting from the algorithmic biasing of information in order to promote capital.

Noble connects the product of surveillance capitalism with the oppression that necessarily occurs as a result of following this logic of accumulation. In order to be marketable, information needs to follow capital. If it is profitable that searching for "black girls" on Google results in porn

because those are paid results, then those are the results that will be shown. And because capital largely falls in the hands of an already privileged class due to the reification of racism through racial formation (Omi and Winant, 1994) and maintaining the White substrate (Lipsitz, 1995), then Google search results will predominantly reinforce the values of the privileged class while further marginalizing already marginalized populations (Noble, 2018). A logic of accumulation is agnostic to these social effects as it is only driven by market forces. Thus far, any changes that these platforms have made to their behavior in relation to concerns about social justice have all been in reaction to negative publicity (for example, the changes Google made to their results for the search "black girls" (Noble, 2018)), and are not indicative of a wider social justice effort.

Fake News: Misinformation and Disinformation

Observations of a logic of accumulation and algorithms of oppression have an impact on what constitutes misinformation and disinformation. For the purposes of this paper, this discussion is only briefly mentioned as an ingredient that shapes the communities and individuals that libraries serve. As Google search results, Facebook feeds, and Amazon suggestions are increasingly personalized, user engagement is an information set not entirely defined by the laws of scientific or journalistic rigor, but rather by marketing and the Big Other motivation to shape the user into an ideal capital automaton, exiled from their own behavior. This being the case, individuals are targeted by information with market logic and less concerned about the truth value of the information. The information set available to an individual is then very possibly constituted of mis- and disinformation as traditionally defined however to the user this information constitutes their information reality.

Those in a privileged enough position to question the underlying principles that shape the information they consume or the platforms that deliver it are not the focus of this paper; it is those who come to the library, with notions of success shaped by these platforms, that are the concern of librarians and critical information literacy. Now that the stage is set for understanding how communities are coming to the library, a discussion about how the library, given the emphasis on information literacy and social justice, can reconcile the forces that shape an individual while at the same time remain empathetic to the identities of the individuals and communities.

Discussion

I have argued that 1) information literacy is inherently a tension between information as commodity and literacy as transfer, or informing through teaching; 2) that critical information literacy is interested in the coproduction of learning between teacher and student in order to bring into alignment the students idea of success; 3) that students, communities, and even librarians are shaped by a logic of accumulation and resulting algorithms of oppression; and 4) that knowledge organization systems, and by extension information systems, are in their design reflections of their designers (and ideally their users). In light of these conditions, how should a librarian to successfully navigate the information literacy space? Success again is contingent on who is defining it, be it the student, teacher, a set of standards imposed by the ACRL, or some combination thereof.

The remainder of this article will focus primarily on Beilin's article as it presents an interesting dilemma when considering critical information literacy. Beilin argues that "higher education today is premised on a certain kind of contract, between student and institution and between student and instructor" and that the student has "has willingly entered into this contract and seeks to acquire the best possible grades and diploma," noting that this is what "success means in the academy." Libraries "strive to make [themselves] indispensable for student success, and librarians are forced to help work toward this common goal" (2016). This is why, Beilin argues, the ACRL has inserted its framework, in order to insert itself as part of this success project. Thus, as students demand training for technical skills, libraries are obligated by the contract between student and university to perform technical training, as "it is important to respect students' aspirations for success according to the contract" (2016).

Beilin suggests that "our challenge should be to teach success on *two* levels… encourage alternative definitions of success while at the same time ensure success in the existing system." Beilin rightly notes that those who "err on the side of excessive cynicism or pessimism toward the status quo" and therefore discourage students' concept of success do so from a privileged position familiar with neoliberal pressures and able to navigate them while also critiquing them (2016). This is the crux of the issue, a crux made more complex when considering that the students Beilin refers to have been exiled from their own behavior, shaped in no small part by a logic of accumulation. The ask is that librarians on the one hand teach notions of success that reify the information structures informing their values and personal notions of success, *even when those success criteria may be oppressive to the student or the student's community*.

Teaching students practical skills is at once valuable to students as they navigate neoliberal and capitalist landscapes, while also potentially robbing them of the critical tools necessary to reflect on those frameworks and their impacts on marginalized communities and the environment.

"When we question what student success is, we necessarily have to ask what librarian success is. … If we wish to question the purely utilitarian or instrumentalist version of student success, we have to align our own success accordingly" Beilin remarks. Of course, Beilin and critical information literacy is not arguing that we should not attempt to instill students with these critical tools (a criteria of success for most critical librarians), but it does erode away at the possibility of promoting crucial values in a time of surveillance capitalism. Beilin suggests that the academic hustle to produce papers, present at conferences, and dress up CVs is in practice exhibiting those same ideas of success that information professionals hesitate to promote in the library. Therefore, we can't deny students "the skills and abilities that their contracts have promised them [just] as we cannot completely ignore the rules that govern … professional survival" (2016).

It is difficult to argue with this reasoning as it is central to what critical information literacy is asking. In one sense, this is the logical conclusion of critical information literacy: librarians take on the success criteria that students bring with them to the library. Librarians cannot be too critical of these success criteria because to do so would exhibit the privileged social and class status prominent in the information profession and would compromise not just the student's relationship with the library but also their (neoliberal) contract with the academic institution.

Therefore, in order to be a librarian bound be these frameworks, aligning these success criteria is a necessary condition for performing the librarian role. Yes, there might be some students who express interest in critiquing these systems and in this case, the librarian can then explore the critical toolbox. But again, this desire must emanate from the student.

Does considering the implications of surveillance capitalism affect the priorities of critical information literacy? Troublingly, students and community members are increasingly exposed to technological nudges to behave in a manner benefitting marketers and advertisers. How are librarians to push back against these information consumption behaviors so deeply embedded in the information and social substrate? Clark, while observing and listening to students go through the information seeking process, notes that students "value both a good grade and creative expression to varying degrees, none seems to follow either a simple neoliberal desire for economic success, nor an idealistic Freirean vision of cultural transformation" (Clark, 2016). This suggests that there is some hope that students are not completely acclimating themselves with neoliberal models of success as they navigate their academic journeys. However it also does not suggest just what students are getting at in their academic endeavors in the first place, and why. These motivations are important when considering the values of the student, academia, and the library.

Finally, Beilin offers a glimmer of hope, suggesting that information professionals can "[present themselves] (through… professional organizations and institutional groupings) as dedicated to the public good of the library and to the liberation of all people, especially those most likely to

be disenfranchised and oppressed by the forces of neoliberalism" (2016). This comment leaves information professionals and librarians in a complicated position. It asks librarians to lead split professional lives: on the one hand, be the critical librarian motivated by values of liberation, democracy, and attunement to marginalized communities while, on the other, adopt success criteria driven by neoliberal, commercial, and surveillance capitalistic values. Sometimes these alternative value sets overlap, or at least can be framed in a non-contradictory way. In some instances, however, these values may be contradictory, as when a student is indoctrinated by fake news. The contradictory identities asked of the librarian, as well as the resulting burnout and job creep noted in the profession (Ettarh, 2018), still remain an issue.

In the paper *Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction,* Drabinski suggests queer theory as a framework for navigating the power structures of classification systems in the library. In discussing the Library of Congress Subject Headings, Drabinski notes that "the problem is not that cataloging happens, but that it happens incorrectly" and that the resulting knowledge of self and world "is understood to be discursively produced, socially powerful, and always already undergoing revision." Rather than focus on fixing perceived problems only to have those fixes become anew set of problems to be fixed, queer theory can "refocus attention away from the project of producing 'correct' knowledge organization systems, pointing toward a project of dialogic pedagogical interventions" (2013). This strategy, while oppositional in nature, is one method librarians can employ when performing the role of librarian. Drabinski, citing Butler, notes that "discursive construction of categories means that

categories produce each other" and therefore "categories are not mutually exclusive, but mutually contingent" (2013).

Adopting this articulation of queer theory to the professional identity of librarians, the identities that might be considered contradictory become contingent, as does the role of the librarian. Librarians, asked to perform the role of teacher when performing information literacy, take on certain values and success criteria while at the same time, must perform the role of the critical librarian, and take on values of critical information practice in their execution of literacy. In this way, librarians can lead by example; their performance both in the library and in their profession are always pushing up against hegemonic categories and practices, even when they are engaged in them. Performing this role is an act of discursive construction, defining their professional self both in acknowledgement of these hegemonic forces and against them. In this way, librarians still retain their relevance in the information space while at the same time define it.

Conclusion

This paper explores the role of the critical librarian in an age of surveillance capitalism and algorithms of oppression. As academic librarians are now expected to engage in information literacy as part of their role due to external pressures to make the library relevant in contemporary academia, conversations about how to engage with students in a way that both adheres to the success of the student while at the same time encouraging critical thought on information are widespread (Pawley, 2003) (Elmborg, 2006) (Beilin, 2016). Critical information literacy recommends a Freireian approach to teaching, incorporating the students into the

production of learning along with the librarian. It is suggested that in order to engage with students most completely is to take on their success criteria when performing information literacy. Criticizing their criteria for success is to endanger their success as students within academia and their relationship with the library. This conversation is made more complex when considering that students and their success criteria are dramatically shaped by logics of accumulation and algorithms biased toward the ruling class, as these information systems are impactful on the identities of the individuals and users who engage with them. This paper suggests that in order to perform the role of the librarian given these constraints, queer theory is a useful framework. Queer theory suggests that the identities of a librarian are contingent, not contradictory, and by living the dialectic a librarian can lead by example. This framework is especially useful as communities and society are incorporated into Big Other as a way of pushing back against the persistent and invisible shaping of behavior by surveillance capitalism.

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