

Perspective

Four Theses for Critical Library and Information Studies: A Manifesto

Jonathan Cope

ABSTRACT

This essay proposes four theses for a Critical Library and Information Studies (CLIS) research agenda. The author argues that a normative commitment to libraries as social institutions should guide any future CLIS research agenda, that the natural sciences are a poor model for CLIS research, that value neutrality should be abandoned, and that any CLIS project should propose alternatives.

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2015 James Elmborg and Scott Walter¹ took to the pages of *College and Research Libraries* to argue that “overly constraining definitions of what ‘counts’ as research still dominate our journals and our assessment of professional achievements, much to the detriment of the maturing thinking in our field [Library and Information Science].” That this argument appeared in academic librarianship’s most prominent journal published by the Association of College and Research Libraries suggests that “critical” approaches and methods are finding greater acceptance in the discipline. In recent years a literature of critical theory about librarianship has emerged;² while some LIS publications appear to be more receptive to critical concepts and methodologies. Despite these developments, Librarianship needs a scholarly space where library thinkers and practitioners can articulate and debate key critical concepts, ideas, and theories without having to define basic terms, and—more importantly—without having to struggle against the perception that engagement in normative questions (i.e., subjective questions related to values such as justice, equality, and rights) is somehow polemical, unrigorous, or unscholarly.

In this essay I propose four theses that I believe can unite the disparate strands of an emerging interdisciplinary discourse that I call—despite reservations about the introduction of another academic term/subdiscipline—Critical Library and Information Studies (CLIS).³ I believe that by exploring these theses the discipline can move beyond the constraints that are imposed by this narrow understanding of “what counts” described by Elmborg and Walter. This debate should be of particular importance to librarians who believe that libraries should actively strive to create a more just society. By avoiding questions related to values and politics, LIS research risks irrelevance by avoiding some of the most pressing issues that now confront those who work in libraries. These theses are exploratory and provisional; they are intended to initiate conversation and provoke debate.

¹ James Elmborg and Scott Walter, “Critical Thinking about ‘Getting Research Published’ in College & Research Libraries,” *College and Research Libraries* 76, no. 1 (2015): 2-5.

² Works such as Gloria J., Leckie, Lisa M. Given, and John Buschman. *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science Exploring the Social from across the Disciplines* (Santa Barbara, Calif: Libraries Unlimited, 2010). <http://ebooks.abcclio.com/?isbn=9781591589402>; Accardi, Maria T., Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier. 2010. *Critical Library Instruction Theories and Methods* (Duluth, Minn: Library Juice Press, 2010), and the literature reviewed by Eamon Tewell in “A Decade of Critical Information Literacy,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 24-43.

³ These theses are mine alone and do not reflect the editorial policies of this journal.

1. LIBRARY AND INFORMATION STUDIES IS TIED TO LIBRARIES AS INSTITUTIONS. THIS ENTAILS AN EXPLICIT NORMATIVE COMMITMENT TO EXAMINING LIBRARIES.

A library is an idea that is made material through the action of human agents. Throughout the history of libraries people have come together to create, maintain, dismantle, or expand libraries as an institution. A normative commitment to libraries as an institution should distinguish library and information studies from related fields like information science and knowledge management. Our discipline is bound to a specific social institution in ways that others are not. Normative reflection and debate about what libraries can and should be, and what they have been in the past, must be placed front and center in our research, debate, and discussions. The varied political, economic, and ecological crises that confront our planet require continued rigorous and thoughtful engagement in how libraries are situated as institutions that are continually buffeted by larger social forces. The task of meeting these challenges cannot be met by the methods of descriptive science that tend to dominate the applied literature in the field. While I believe that it is important to point out the limitations of these descriptive studies, we also must acknowledge the institutional settings that encourage such approaches. Academic librarians in particular, are often pushed to publish for reasons of tenure and promotion and frequently have little training in research methods. Working librarians have a limited amount of time outside of their varied and numerous day-to-day professional responsibilities and often lack time allocated solely to research and writing. These are not conditions that are conducive to a critically engaged intellectual practice. To assume the importance of libraries does not mean that we should be inattentive to the many ways in which libraries have historically served the interests of racism, patriarchy, or class inequality—to name a few forms of oppression in which libraries have actively or implicitly participated. We interrogate our past and present to open possibilities for our future. Perhaps after critical reflection it is determined that there is nothing left of the library tradition worth preserving. If that is the case, then what can libraries be in the future? Who are the actors likely to change libraries? What are the values, norms, and ideals that should form the basis for critical inquiry and real world library projects going forward?

Just as political philosophy is an extended—perhaps indeterminate—debate about how to best arrange public and institutional life, I argue that CLIS should be an extended debate about how to best arrange libraries as disseminators and preservers of information, knowledge, and culture. The development of a CLIS journal means that research and writing in this vein will have a discourse community in which this work will not have to spend an inordinate amount of time and space addressing the concerns of LIS researchers with differing epistemological and ontological approaches. This is not a call for obscurantism, or for the creation of an “in group” of CLIS initiates. By creating a separate discursive space within the larger discipline CLIS may be positioned to engage

the larger disciplinary and professional discourse. For example, CLIS should be better able to evaluate social movements and how their specific demands may potentially expand values such as social justice, democracy, and fairness. Such evaluations of social movements are unlikely to occur in professional spaces that strive to maintain strict value neutrality. Key questions about the future of libraries must be posed now—the creation of a self-aware CLIS space makes it possible for LIS researchers and practitioners to challenge and debate fundamental assumptions more rigorously and freely.

2. CRITICAL LIBRARY AND INFORMATION STUDIES IS NOT A SCIENCE, NOR SHOULD IT STRIVE TO BE ONE.

The natural sciences provide a poor model for library and information studies research. Libraries and information are the product of social relations; therefore, any attempt to understand them in isolation from the larger social contexts in which they exist will necessarily be limited. The attempt to apply the methods of the natural sciences to library and information studies can be viewed as a part of the broader attempts—particularly within the 20th century American academy—to provide scholars investigating social phenomena with the methodological certainty of the natural and physical sciences. It is no accident that the first graduate program in the United States to pursue a research agenda that was explicitly “Library Science” was the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago in the 1920s where, concomitantly, many other social sciences began to explore how to “professionalize vocational activities... (such as) dairy science, management science, military science, mortuary science, political science, and even creation science/intelligent design.”⁴

Most other social science disciplines have had robust debates in the past thirty or forty years about the role of empiricism and as a result have developed much more varied methodological and epistemological approaches. As F.J. Sietl puts it, “although research in library science has come a long way, it still has not reached the maturity of other disciplines... [and struggles with] an academically imposed inferiority complex and linguistic dilemmas on the meaning of research for an applied and service field” (Quoted in Richardson).⁵ None of this is to argue that empirical methods and studies are of little worth, or that they do not belong in LIS; however, LIS must make space for a variety of different methods if it is to meet the challenges that now confront libraries. The

⁴ John Richardson, “History of American Library Science: Its Origins and Early Development,” *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, Third Edition, in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*. Third Edition, ed. Marcia J. Bates and Mary Niles Maack (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2010), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

methodological certainty that researchers and practitioners are striving to achieve by labeling their work as “science” is intellectually limiting and ephemeral, at best. I am skeptical that other academic disciplines and departments are likely to view LIS as being more rigorous because we declare our discipline a science.

Despite the ease with which library science rolls off of the tongue, CLIS should empathetically be a *studies*. Clearly, when considered within the context of university education such a move may seem politically unwise. After all, the politics of austerity and the corporatization of the North American research university mean that disciplines and domains of knowledge that can be more easily monetized, or that vocationally prepare students for the workforce, are more likely to fare better when administrators are deciding where to allocate scarce funds. However, I argue that by explicitly abandoning the pretense of scientific certainty, a separate discourse—one that engages more openly with normative questions—may emerge that can better defend specific library practices and approaches that add to a broadly defined common good. In short, the more that we research and debate the value of libraries, the better positioned we are to defend their best aspects.

3. CRITICAL LIBRARY AND INFORMATION STUDIES DOES NOT ACCEPT THE IDEA OF NEUTRALITY.

The vision of the ideologically neutral library should be consigned to the proverbial dustbin of history. The argument that—particularly in 2015—a social subject can operate in the world—particularly in a professional/occupational setting—and not be shaped ideologically by larger social forces is difficult to sustain. Every decision made by a librarian to include or exclude an item from a collection, every interaction with a patron, every managerial policy written, is shaped by innumerable social forces. The belief that a professional could operate in some kind of strictly value neutral way contradicts common sense and history. Library collections should strive to be ideologically diverse, but the ideal of strict value neutrality is difficult to justify because librarians should be aware of the values that underlie the profession.

According to Michael Harris, the emphasis placed on library neutrality came to the fore in the United States in 1930s/1940s (particularly in public librarianship) when librarians emphasized their role as “guardian(s) of the people’s right to know”⁶ as a value that could stand in opposition to the international rise of fascism. Libraries of all types (public, academic, school) grew enormously in the postwar period as the provision of public education expanded as veterans and first generation college students flooded

⁶ Michael H. Harris, 1995. *History of Libraries in the Western World*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press.

into post-secondary education in unprecedented numbers. The idea of neutrality fit well within the ideological framework of the liberal pluralist/consensus politics that dominated mainstream American political thought during the late 1940s/1950s.

The maintenance of a strict value neutrality with respect to libraries acts to obscure the numerous ways that any institution acts within the framework of larger social and ideological forces. CLIS holds that a discussion of values, or intellectual priors, should be placed front and center in any theoretical or research project, so that differing perspectives can be debated and evaluated based on the premises set forth. These considerations have nothing to do with larger debates about empiricism in the social sciences. Libraries are a social institution and must be considered socially.

4. CRITICAL LIBRARY AND INFORMATION STUDIES IS CRITICAL INsofar AS IT IS CRITICAL OF LIS, BUT IT MUST PROPOSE ALTERNATIVES.

The central impulse contained within the varied strains of critical theory in the West is the methodical work of “unmasking.” Although fundamentally different thinkers, I would argue that the seeds of critical theory lie in the approaches of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. Both thinkers questioned that which appeared clearly and self-evidently above the surface, and developed analytical approaches that sought to interrogate the limitations of the Enlightenment project. Although (particularly in the case of Marx) these thinkers were not criticizing Enlightenment per se, they both identified numerous ways in which this project (namely the use of reason to harmonize and rationalize society) became entwined with power. CLIS maintains that a process of question posing and unmasking can alter how people think about social institutions and power.

Much of the academic work that is classified as critical theory uses concepts and theories developed by notoriously difficult and highly abstract thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Jurgen Habermas, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Theodore Adorno (just to name a few). Those without a background in philosophy or social theory may find themselves overwhelmed by lengthy and dense explorations of these thinkers and they may rightly ask how such abstract theorizing relates to the issues confronting librarians on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, much of what is called critical theory developed as a response to the Western philosophical tradition by Western postwar intellectuals deeply embedded within that same tradition (i.e., “dead white dudes”). What can these forms of inquiry offer to those who view their activism as being grounded in their own lived experience?

To these skeptics I would say that CLIS intellectual inquiry is not *necessarily* activism or social justice work; practice—or praxis—may well be informed by CLIS work, but the task of any critical theoretical project within LIS should be to pose new questions about libraries and information that may not have discreet or clear answers.

To the library activist “on the ground” this focus on more abstract questions may seem unrelated to pressing issues. However, libraries are social institutions and like any social institution they are the product of varied ideologies, worldviews, economic forces, and power relationships. Failure to create a space in which these concepts can be rigorously debated, and the familiar made strange, limits perspectives. If this kind of intellectual work is uninteresting to some, so be it. I believe that it is important enough to justify the existence of a journal explicitly dedicated to advancing these kinds of debates and conversations. Conversely, the CLIS should avoid the worst aspects of the often jargon laden, and sometimes impenetrable, writing that can be found classified under the critical theory banner. LIS is a discipline that attracts researchers from a wide variety of academic backgrounds and a familiarity with key thinkers/literature—often found in other disciplines—cannot be assumed. To paraphrase a perhaps apocryphal Albert Einstein quote: everything should be made as simple as possible, not simpler.

The issues confronting libraries are deadly serious and must be examined with the intellectual honesty and rigor that the current situation demands. I believe that it is only through a process of critical questioning that alternatives will emerge. However, CLIS must not merely be an act of negation; it should propose substantive alternatives based on normative arguments that can also be subjected to critical scrutiny and debate. CLIS should propose projects and initiatives that strive to achieve the normative goals advocated for in any CLIS literature. For example, if research demonstrates that Google search perpetuates the cultural stereotypes about women of color⁷ what would an information project based in libraries that intends to counter such stereotypes be like? What values would it use to make decisions? How could the success or failure of such a project be evaluated? Or, does the pervasive marketization of information and culture reinforce an understanding of success and failure that is too narrow and based solely on its value as a commodity? I believe that the Sisyphean task of making libraries thriving and more socially just requires an intellectual commitment to not only values and ideals, but to proposing real world projects/experiments that might further normative goals such as social justice and democracy.

⁷ Safiya U. Noble. 2013. “Google Search: Hyper-visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible,” *InVisible Culture*: Issue 19.

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