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# Why is the Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies Needed Today?

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*Editors' Note*

## **Why is the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* Needed Today?**

Andrew J Lau, Alycia Sellie, and Ronald E. Day

The *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* (JCLIS) was established in response to a perceived need in the landscape of library and information studies scholarship for an open platform and venue for critical discourse and inquiry. JCLIS seeks to promote the creation, development, production, and accessibility of robust scholarship that might not be accepted or published in well-established and top-ranked journals for utilizing methods or advancing perspectives that critique the discursive status quo. As scholarship becomes increasingly commoditized, monetized, and “productized,” JCLIS was envisioned as both intervention and resistance to its commercialization and rarefication, as well as narrow definitions and conceptions of library and information studies that privilege or cast the field in the terms and methods of positivist or empiricist paradigms and dominant epistemological and ontological constructs, and the normative tendencies of the field to center such paradigms. Moreover, JCLIS seeks to publish essays and reviews that are explicit and unabashed in their commitments to social justice, ethics, and intellectual freedom.

In our daily work within LIS, we often find publications that promise unhindered access only to charge author fees behind the scenes. Or we see publishers that celebrate hybrid open access models that reveal some content to all readers while saving other material for those affiliated with moneyed institutions. JCLIS' approach to the licensing and distribution of our work relate to larger principles of resistance; we see issues of access as politically imperative in struggles against larger forces in for-profit scholarly publishing.

This inaugural issue comprises eight articles, five perspective essays, one literature review, and one book review. Together, these pieces provide a sample of the kinds of inquiry, critique, and reflexivity that the journal seeks to promote. Individually, these essays provide literary warrant for questions and methods that have been previously overlooked, marginalized, or excluded in LIS scholarship. The contributors to

this issue are focused on tracing connections: Between theory, practice, and social impact or implications of information work and scholarship; between concepts, theoretical perspectives, and ideas in LIS and other disciplines and fields of inquiry; between the present moment in LIS scholarship and professional practice, the larger socio-cultural landscape in which LIS scholarship is situated within, and possible futures in which library and information scholars and practitioners might enact agendas around social and cognitive justice; and theories, methods, and concepts oriented toward dismantling systems and structures of oppression within our institutions, organizations, and educational programs.

Multiple facets of the need for a journal dedicated entirely to critical library and information studies are highlighted in the essays included in this first issue. For example, two contributors to this issue gesture toward the ways in which race and (anti-)racism might be approached as the subject of critique or analysis within the information professions as well as the professional discourse and academic scholarship. David James Hudson offers a much-needed critique of diversity as the primary and dominant mode of anti-racism in LIS and its focus on demographic inclusion and representation. Hudson argues that the current diversity paradigm in LIS obscures the complexity of race, its broader and historically contingent structures, and power. Exploring structures and practices as well as a proposition for rectifying the hidden or unspoken racism of library policies, Hudson's incisive critique of the well-accepted concepts of diversity and inclusion as they appear in LIS discourse underscores the necessity for querying terms that might seem on the surface to be unproblematic. Hudson parses the rhetoric of liberal anti-racism in LIS, problematizing notions at the core of anti-racist modalities in LIS such as "cultural competence," and the ways in which the systemic racism – even in politically progressive scenarios like professional associations' diversity statements – might be occluded by the diversity paradigm's focus and insistence upon the individualistic "competence" of actors and actions.

Melissa Adler adopts a different approach to exploring the persistence of racism and racialization in LIS. Whereas Hudson's essay turns its analytical focus toward LIS discourse and the deployment of the diversity paradigm as anti-racist strategy, Adler plumbs the history of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century classification to excavate their philosophical and sociopolitical underpinnings. She contends that "systemic violence is fundamentally a classification problem," and that a historical perspective on the racialization of subject classifications can elucidate some of the complex dynamics of racialization in the present. Adler concludes her essay by advocating for the creation and development of "taxonomic reparations" that acknowledge and rectify the epistemic violence of racialized subject classifications, as a matter of justice from multiple angles. Embedded in her essay is the recognition that there are deeply ethical implications for the work performed by information professionals like librarians and archivists.

In their essay "Toward an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field," Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee observe the lack of

substantive critique of neoliberalism within the archival discourse and in response, offer a set of correctives. They trace the emergence and normalization of neoliberalism and their effects, the assault on and erosion of the public sphere and notions of “the public good,” and how neoliberalism has affected information labor (specifically, archival labor). Cifor and Lee forcefully argue for methods and approaches that actively seek to recognize and challenge the agendas “that both reflect and uphold neoliberalism’s devastating inequalities and inequities.” Their essay “marks a starting point...[for] a rich trajectory of research, practice, and critique of neoliberalism in archival studies and across LIS.”

Another facet of the need for a dedicated critical library and information studies journal is the continued negotiation of the boundaries of the field in relation to other disciplines, but also what distinguishes critical scholarship within those boundaries. Tami Oliphant’s contribution to this first issue of JCLIS is a review of the literature on big data and data studies to advance the argument that defining critical library and information studies would necessitate also including critical data studies. As a literature review, Oliphant’s contribution extends beyond simply providing a summary of research in the emerging area of data studies; it highlights the intersections of data studies and critical perspectives in LIS as they relate to the study, production, and management of data and for the purposes of enacting social change and encouraging the integration of critical social theory and philosophies from across the disciplines to understand “data.”

On the subject of “datafication,” big data, and information infrastructures, Ramon Diab’s perspective essay employs Roy Bhaskar’s work in critical realism, suggesting that “critical library and information studies might apply critical realist presuppositions and conceptions of reality to cases and exemplars of the social and material relations extended, transformed, and/or negated by the integration of new sources of information within historically specific social structures.” Diab presents two cases to demonstrate how a critical realist perspective might be utilized within critical LIS research: 1) Debt relations in automobile subprime loans in the United States and the use of surveillance technologies to triangulate payment schedules, driving behaviors, and locations to effect control over the recipients of the subprime loans; and 2) the Chinese government’s proposed development of a “social credit system” that algorithmically calculates “social credit scores” for individuals derived from and triangulated between government information, financial institutions, social media, and e-commerce sites.

Heidi L.M. Jacobs and Cal Murgu’s article “Questioning the Past and Possible Futures” examines the intersection between digital historiography (and digital humanities scholarship) and critical librarianship. In this investigation, Jacobs and Murgu draw from concepts of critical librarianship, stating that such an approach to digital humanities projects “...is one that asks critical questions about the larger systemic structures surrounding the work that we do [as librarians], particularly related to issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, privilege, power, voice, access, and so on.”

Their essay adopts an overtly interdisciplinary perspective to place digital historiography and critical librarianship in dialogue with one another, calling attention to the questions that emerge “regarding the ways in which the work we do in libraries and as librarians can intervene in and disrupt regimes and structural inequalities.” Whereas Jacobs and Murgu’s essay adopts an interdisciplinary approach to exploring the intersection between digital historiography and critical librarianship, Hannah Lee in her perspective essay construes library and information studies in transdisciplinary terms to describe the import of systems theoretical approaches and continued relevance of general system(s) theory. Building upon past research that has described LIS as a metadiscipline (such as in the work of Marcia Bates), Lee offers systems theory as a means by which to address an observed lack of other forms of metalevel analyses in LIS discourse, exploring LIS a kind of social system situated in and across multiple disciplinary environments.

Reflexivity emerged as a major facet for a journal like JCLIS, as illustrated in essays contributed by Hudson, Adler, Jacobs and Murgu, and Lee, but in other contributions as well. Nicole Marie Gaston’s essay explores the presence and persistence of Western constructs and concepts in well-accepted methods and theories of information behavior research. Providing reflections on two recent studies conducted in Laos and Samoa, Gaston problematizes social scientific approaches to designing and performing information behavior research by advocating for the importance of situating information behaviors in their socio-cultural contexts. In doing so, Gaston provides a means by which cross-cultural or international research might be conducted in ways that acknowledge and resist the epistemological privileging of Westernized concepts and research approaches within a globalized frame.

Amelia Koford’s perspective essay focuses on the politics of classification and subject description, not unlike Adler’s engagement with classification “along the color line.” Whereas Adler adopts a more formal method in excavating the the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century roots of classification and how their philosophical foundations are imbricated in our current library classifications today, Koford approaches the limitations of subject description through an interview with author and activist Eli Clare. Extrapolating from this interview, Koford draws upon concepts from transgender and genderqueer activism to illustrate a potential method for how one might read subject headings – and perhaps other functions of information work – through a critical lens.

Library and information studies as a field of inquiry and professional practice often intersects with educational functions or are situated in educational institutions. Melissa Gustafson’s article proposes a unified approach to understanding the implications and possibilities for the import of critical pedagogy for libraries, drawing on the work of Paulo Friere and more recent scholarship on critical information literacy instruction. In doing so, Gustafson connects the theoretical underpinnings of critical pedagogy to library instruction and offers practical suggestions for developing and implementing meaningful change in our information institutions and organizations.

Nora Almeida examines some of the paradoxes of openness rhetoric, open educational resources, and the neoliberalized environment of the academy (and indeed, the increasingly globalized “market” for education). Almeida identifies two primary models for open educational resource implementation. On the one hand, open educational resources are construed as a means to reduce costs, increase resource sharing, or as a means to enact local education reform. On the other hand, such resources are made freely available or accessible but decontextualized and divorced from local educational experiences or environments. The latter model emphasizes access to open educational resources, even when access itself is considered a “public good.” In critiquing the rhetorical paradoxes of open educational resources, Almeida draws in perspectives from critical librarianship and critical pedagogy to highlight structures of power and authority as they relate to the creation/development of open educational resources, the larger political economy of the neoliberal university, and the labor obscured by the rhetoric of openness.

Within LIS discourse, a long-standing debate has been the relationship between theory and practice and their tensions. How might critical theoretical perspectives be integrated into library and information practice? In her attempt to answer this question, Nicole Dalmer describes the possibilities for the integration of a critical gerontology approach into public library services and programs for older adults in Canada. As suggested by Dalmer, one of the reasons why a journal like JCLIS is needed today is to document the needs underserved communities (e.g., of older adults) and to imagine and propose novel ways to be able to provide more equitable services and programs to meet their needs. Dalmer argues that more than unidirectionally providing services to the aging public, it is incumbent upon librarians adopting a critical gerontology perspective to design, develop, and offer library services that assess and are responsive to the actual information needs of the community, as they understand them.

In his perspective essay, Timothy Gorichanaz probes the theoretical foundations of LIS, focusing specifically on the work of Michael Buckland and grappling with the disciplinary boundaries of LIS. In doing so, Gorichanaz conducts a close reading of Buckland’s scholarly oeuvre to describe the importance of liberal arts in LIS curricula, and to critically analyze the current state of the iSchool consortium and some of the ways that it educates/disciplines future generations of information scholars and practitioners.

Jonathan Cope’s contribution to this issue is a set of four theses for defining what critical library and information studies might look like in theory and practice. Cope’s manifesto is a proposal of sorts, intended to prompt debate and discussion. To be clear, others have called for or articulated versions of what critical library and information studies might look like (see, for example, the myriad conversations around critical librarianship), Cope’s four theses contribute to this burgeoning discourse by articulating four tenets that might form the basis for a critical LIS research agenda: A commitment to examining libraries, archives, and other information institutions; a

distancing from the narrow confines of scientific paradigms; a resistance to notions of neutrality in LIS research and practice; and the proposal of alternatives to the established and accepted norms and values of LIS.

At its core, JCLIS is a community of scholars and practitioners who share interests and investments in the vitality of critical perspectives and approaches within and with respect to our institutions, organizations, and educational programs. As such, JCLIS requires and relies upon the critical observations of librarians, archivists, museum professionals, educators, and researchers, as well as their critical imaginations and re-imaginings. The editors hope for this issue to be the start of a long and productive, and indeed critical, discussion with respect to the topics, ideas, concepts, and methods included in this first set of essays, as well as others that this community of scholars and practitioners might identify.