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# The Labor of Informational Democracy: A Library and Information Science Framework for Evaluating the Democratic Potential in Socially-Generated Information

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**PROGRESSIVE  
COMMUNITY ACTION:  
CRITICAL THEORY AND  
SOCIAL JUSTICE IN LIBRARY  
AND INFORMATION  
SCIENCE**

**Bharat Mehra and Kevin Rioux  
Editors**

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## Chapter 3

### THE LABOR OF INFORMATIONAL DEMOCRACY: A LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL IN SOCIALLY-GENERATED INFORMATION

Jonathan Cope

Beginning in the 1890s, the term *industrial democracy* was used in the United States by middle-class social reformers, radicals in the Industrial Workers of the World, and socialists to articulate the idea that in order for democracy to have any substantive meaning, its logic must extend beyond formal political institutions and into the realm of economic production.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1973, sociologists began speaking of a “post-industrial society,”<sup>2</sup> and in the 1990s the idea that the production, consumption, and manipulation of information constituted the central logic of the “information economy” became widespread.<sup>3</sup> Recently, the term “information democracy” has been used by Microsoft founder and CEO Bill Gates to describe the wealth of information that is currently

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1. David Montgomery, “Industrial Democracy or Democracy in Industry?: The Theory and Practice of the Labor Movement, 1870-1925,” in *Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein and John Harris Howell (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1993), 20.

2. Daniel Bell, *The Coming Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

3. “Economy, New.” *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, edited by Larry E. Sullivan. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Reference, 2009. 168. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Web. 15 Apr. 2015.

available to ordinary citizens.<sup>4</sup> The idea that the new “information society” is “democratic” is so clearly implied that adding a democratic qualifier may seem unnecessary.

Missing from such discussions is any examination of how markets can occlude the development of vital knowledge, culture, and information without a clear economic value. Also missing is an examination of how equal access to the Internet can be inhibited by pre-existing social inequalities and how the human labor needed to create the devices, knowledge, and culture that constitute the information society should be valued. Thomas Augst has said that “[t]o think about libraries is to think about the material forms that culture takes in a social landscape.”<sup>5</sup> All too often, the supposed immateriality of digital technologies has obscured the material infrastructure and human labor required to create a digital commons. The idea that socially-generated information contains the potential to create more participatory forms of communication and knowledge has a popular resonance. The proliferation of systems of “socially” generated information production, dissemination, and consumption has elicited commentary in Library and Information Science (LIS).<sup>6</sup> However, as the Internet critic Astra Taylor observes, a funny thing happened on the way to the democratic digital revolution when just “a handful of enormous companies... profit off the creations and interactions of others”<sup>7</sup> and when forms of culture and knowledge that cannot be easily monetized find institutional support lacking.

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4. Peters, Michael. “The Political Economy of Informational Democracy.” *The International Journal of Learning* 14, no. 6 (2007) 29-36.

5. Thomas Augst, “American Libraries and Agencies of Culture,” in *Libraries as Agencies of Culture*, ed. Thomas Augst and Wayne A. Wiegand (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 5.

6. Kang-Pyo Lee, Hong-Gee Kim, and Hyoung-Joo Kim, “A Social Inverted Index for Social-Tagging-Based Information Retrieval,” *Journal of Information Science*. 38, no. 4 (2012); Jonathan Furner, “User Tagging of Library Resources: Toward a Framework for System Evaluation,” *International Cataloging and Bibliographic Control* 37, no. 3 (2008).

7. Astra Taylor, *The People’s Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), 14.

Libraries and the discipline of LIS must respond to these developments with a more fully developed conception of the common good and the fundamental role that knowledge, culture, and information play in its constitution. The increasing neoliberal marketization of public goods and services means that a well defined conception of social justice must play a larger role in how librarianship views these economic and technological developments in order for libraries to survive. Libraries are perfectly situated institutionally to develop a more socially just infrastructure for a new knowledge commons, but only if they develop a theory of action that examines critical theory and the political economy of librarianship so that librarians can rethink the material forms that culture can take in a digital social landscape.

In this essay, I advance a framework that draws from the methods of normative political theory, critical theory, and William Birdsall's<sup>8</sup> call for the development of a political economy of librarianship. Birdsall observes that "[l]ibraries are the creation and instrument of public policy derived from political processes,"<sup>9</sup> and what he calls an "ideology of information technology" obscures power relations and suggests that "[i]n the knowledge-based economy only the marketplace should determine how information, its primary raw material, is generated, priced, and distributed."<sup>10</sup>

Although the ideal of democracy is frequently invoked in LIS, the more complicated questions of what exactly democracy entails are frequently avoided, and "the vast portion of this literature (on democracy in LIS) rehearses and repeats the basic ideas of Jefferson and Madison from 200 years ago."<sup>11</sup> John Buschman argues that in LIS democratic theory is an "unfinished, discontinued idea... (and that) there is a silence

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8. William Birdsall, "A Political Economy of Librarianship?" *Hermes: Revue Critique* 6 (2000).

9. *Ibid.*, 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 5.

11. John Buschman, "Democratic Theory in Library Information Science: Toward an Emendation," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 58, no. 10 (2007): 1483.

maintained”<sup>12</sup> when difficult questions about specific democratic practices arise. This is not a trivial, recondite theoretical concern—as more information and knowledge are produced and consumed “socially” in digital environs that are embedded in complicated social and economic relations, it has become commonplace to suggest simply placing information online somehow makes liberal democratic societies more democratic. LIS must rise to the occasion and develop a democratic theoretical apparatus that can be used to promote information policy and practice in the public interest. LIS’s historical, institutional, and normative democratic commitments leave the discipline well situated to develop such a program; however, the aposiopetic—to use Buschman’s term—nature of democratic theory in LIS, and its inattention to political economy and social justice, leaves LIS with few tools to critically evaluate claims and to guide action.

What I will henceforth call *socially-generated information*—derived from Yochai Benkler’s<sup>13</sup> concept of social production—entails a massive transformation of the information systems in which information is produced. This essay begins by outlining the characteristics of socially-generated information and by acknowledging Benkler’s contention that the “change brought about by the networked information environment is deep.”<sup>14</sup> However, these changes cannot be extricated from the political economy of early twenty-first century capitalism. As a result, this essay briefly examines the political economy of information for contextual purposes before outlining a framework that libraries can use to analyze socially-generated information within a larger discussion about democratic communication and the contemporary information environment.

The evaluative framework that I propose in this essay involves three democratic horizons of analysis: *the horizon of access*, *the horizon of production*, and *the horizon of communicative speech*. First, I use scholarship about

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12. Ibid., 1484.

13. Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2006).

14. Ibid., 1.

the persistence of the digital divide,<sup>15</sup> copyright law,<sup>16</sup> and what has been called the emerging knowledge commons<sup>17</sup> to argue for a *horizon of access* that can evaluate the ability of social actors to access and to shape the communicative networks and material used to communicate and transmit information. I then examine some of the key ideas of autonomist Marxists<sup>18</sup> about immaterial labor to analyze a *horizon of production* that evaluates the labor of information production and the complicated questions that uncompensated labor—the labor upon which many of these systems are built—poses for those interested in social justice. I conclude by developing what I call a *horizon of communicative speech* that evaluates how speech communities utilize these technologies by engaging in the democratic theory of thinkers like Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser<sup>19</sup> that predates their development. I will conclude by outlining potential policies that could be pursued by governments, libraries, and educational institutions acting in accordance with such a framework.

This framework is intended as a way to provoke debate and suggest action when thinking about proposed forms of progressive community action and development. A great example of this type of method is the philosopher Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach to global development that, instead of focusing on a traditional concept of human rights historically associated with "negative liberty," focuses on positive

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15. Sharon Stover, "The US Digital Divide: A Call for a New Philosophy," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 31:2, 114-122.

16. Lawrence Lessig, "Getting Our Values around Copyright Right," *Educational Review* March/April 2010; Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How It Threatens Creativity*, New York: New York University Press, 2001.

17. Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom, "An Overview of the Knowledge Commons," in *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 9.

18. Søren Mørk Petersen, "Loser Generated Content: From Participation to Exploitation," *First Monday* 13, no. 3 (2008); Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

19. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, (1990): 57; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 296.

liberties such as human dignity and flourishing.<sup>20</sup> Systematic reflection and debate about goals is a necessary first step in the development of any community action plan, and the methods of normative political theory—Nussbaum’s capabilities approach being an instructive example of this method—provide LIS with excellent tools to begin this analysis.

## Methodology

The goal of this essay is to provide library policy makers and those who work in libraries with a general set of concepts and principles that can be used to guide action. The intellectual project of critical theory is methodologically perfectly suited for this task. While John Rawls’s concept of “justice as fairness” is relevant to any discussion of social justice, critical theory’s interests in the further democratization of capitalism and in human liberation inform this work’s conception of social justice. Drawing from a set of thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School tradition (e.g., Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer), critical theory is fundamentally concerned with human emancipation. James Bohman argues that critical theory “must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation.”<sup>21</sup> The collection and analysis of data are fundamental aspects of research in LIS and the social sciences, but systematic normative analysis lies at the core of both the critical theoretical and post-Rawlsian philosophical projects.<sup>22</sup> Political economists have had to confront the objections of

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20. Martha Nussbaum, “Promoting Women’s Capabilities,” in *Global Tensions: Challenges and Opportunities in the World Economy*, ed. Lourdes Benería and Savitri Bisnath (New York: Routledge, 2004).

21. James Bohman, “Critical Theory,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta last modified 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/critical-theory>.

22. Andrea Sangivanni, “Normative Political Theory: A Flight from Reality?” in *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme*, ed. Duncan Bell (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

classical and neoclassical economists who contend that “value neutrality... define[s]... the limits of the relationship between economics and moral philosophy.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, economics should strive to be a hard science, and it should only examine values as “preferences registered by market choices.”<sup>24</sup> Normative political theorists confront the objections of realists who claim that political reality is defined by power politics and that normative reflection is a distraction that insists on an ideal theory of justice instead of presenting and comparing feasible “course[s] of action, policies, and reforms available to us here and now.”<sup>25</sup> Such objections to normative analysis and political economy are likely to persist; however, LIS’s institutional commitment to democracy makes systematic reflection and debate about what these commitments entail all the more important. Although an ideal may not be feasibly achieved in the here and now, articulating and debating ideals and examining how they are put into action is praxis—the ultimate goal of critical theory.

Although there has been more work from a critical theoretical perspective in LIS in recent years, the discipline’s aspirations to be viewed as a descriptive science have all too often minimized the importance of historical, theoretical, and normative questions.<sup>26</sup> Libraries are material institutions, but they only exist in the world because human actors decided that they should be built, maintained, and expanded. The democratic mission of libraries (particularly public and academic libraries) in the United States is so clearly embedded in the rationale for their existence that this failure to rigorously engage in normative questions is not merely an intellectual issue; it threatens the basis for libraries’ continued importance in society. As John Budd argues, the perception that libraries are simply “businesses in a market” inhibits the development

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23. Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 2009), 33.

24. *Ibid.*, 33.

25. Sangivanni, “Normative Political Theory,” 225.

26. Wayne Wiegand, “Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots: What the Past Tells Us about the Present; Reflections on the Twentieth-Century History of American Librarianship,” *Library Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (1999).

of these democratic capacities.<sup>27</sup> Critical theory provides an ideal basis for systematic thinking about how libraries as institutional actors can work to democratize the production, consumption, and ownership of knowledge.

This work applies theories and research from outside of LIS in an examination of a new information development (what I call socially-generated information) that, for the most part, developed outside of the institutional context of libraries. It is vital that developments and theories from outside of LIS be explored so that libraries can respond to them. If Birdsall's "ideology of information technology" influences a substantial number of decision makers and the general public then the growing importance of socially-generated information must be addressed. The advent of the modern American public and academic library was the consequence of a convergence of historical, technological, and ideological factors. The shape that libraries will take in the twenty-first century remains undetermined. Libraries can play a vital role in building the infrastructure of new digital knowledge commons, but only if they look beyond LIS's disciplinary boundaries. The implications of the proposed framework for future empirical research and for academic and public libraries will be most fully explored at the conclusion of this essay.

### **Socially-Generated Information**

In *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), Yochi Benkler analyzes a process of production that he calls *social production*. Benkler finds that social production upends classical economics in that the communicative networks created by distributed computing allow for collaborations in which the incentives that are assumed to be at the core of classical and neoclassical economics—consumers acting rationally in response to market incentives—do not come into play. For instance, there is no individual

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27. John Budd, "Public Library Leaders and Changing Society," *Public Library Quarterly* 26, no. 3/4: (2007).

economic incentive to add tags to a YouTube video that will make it more widely accessible if the agent that is adding that information does not gain monetarily from their labor. Much of the literature on this topic calls this type of information user-generated content, and in recent years it has become a fundamental aspect of the Internet. It can be as simple as commenting on a page (e.g., “I like this!”) or as complex as analyzing massive tranches of data (e.g., a “crowd-sourced” piece of investigative journalism). The participatory and collaborative development of software that has been described as the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement plays a large role in Benkler’s analysis. The most successful commercial Internet ventures of the past decade (e.g., Google, Facebook) have been able to use content/information produced by billions of users to generate value for their owners and stockholders. Enormous amounts of information are created every day as citizens communicate their dreams, fears, and desires via heavily commercialized distributed computing networks. The disclosures of Edward Snowden in 2013 about the depth and scope of the US National Security Administration’s collection of information has demonstrated the degree to which so much of contemporary culture and communication occurs in online distributed networks with a nebulous, contested, and evolving social contract between users, private/corporate power, and the state.

Clearly, economic production and the creation of information has always been a highly social activity. What differentiates what I call socially-generated information from past forms of information production is the sheer scale of information being collected and the peer-to-peer nature of how it is exchanged. Benkler<sup>28</sup> goes so far as to say that social production is a new mode of production, because it eliminates many of the barriers to bringing an idea to market that existed in the Industrial Age. Instead of creating discrete packets of information that consumers consider to be commodities of sufficient value to purchase outright, the largest new technology companies create services and spaces in which users contribute value as they use the products. A critical strand

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28. Benkler, “The Wealth of Networks,” 23.

of analysis has emerged that views these organizational forms as ways of extracting uncompensated value<sup>29</sup> from users who freely donate their time and labor to produce value for these firms. In this endeavor, Autonomist Marxists have been perceptive in identifying how affective and social forms of labor (i.e., labor that is not tied to the production of specific commodities, or “playbor”) adds to the general value present in an economy/society that can then be “reterritorialized” by capital for the extraction of surplus value.<sup>30</sup> For the remainder of this essay, the term socially-generated information will be used to describe this process of information production.

In order to contextualize socially-generated information, a brief account of the political economy of information is essential, although an exhaustive review of the literature on the political economy of information is beyond the scope of the present inquiry. Within LIS there is an emerging literature on neoliberalism<sup>31</sup> and how the discourse surrounding public institutions has changed in the United States and United Kingdom since the political and economic philosophies associated with Thatcher/Reagan came to power in the late 1970s. Whatever one names these philosophies, arguments that see a broadly defined free market as a neutral arbiter of value and as the ultimate processor of information have resonated widely and remain integral to the current political debate.<sup>32</sup> When the concept of socially-generated informa-

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29. Søren Mørk Petersen, “Loser Generated Content: From Participation to Exploitation,” *First Monday* 13, no. 3 (2008).

30. Ronald Day, “Social Capital, Value, and Measure: Antonio Negri’s Challenge to Capitalism,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 53, no. 12 (2002).

31. For a discussion of neoliberalism and LIS see Maura Seal, “The Neoliberal Library,” in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, ed. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013); John Buschman, *Libraries, Classrooms, and the Interests of Democracy: Marking the Limits of Neoliberalism* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2012); Karen P. Nicholson, “The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change” *College and Research Libraries* 76, no. 3 (2015): 328-338.

32. Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London, UK: Verso, 2013).

tion is situated within a discussion about the role of markets in liberal democracy, it becomes apparent that the concept of the “wisdom of the crowd” as being synonymous with democracy can fit neatly within an ideological framework that sees the “wisdom of the market” as being the ultimate expression of democracy. In certain ways, Benkler cuts against the contention that markets are the ultimate processor of information, because he argues that “nonmarket collaborations” facilitate more efficient participation than “traditional market mechanisms and corporations.”<sup>33</sup> Despite this critique of neoclassical economics, what Benkler calls “non-market” production is firmly embedded within a market-based society. Surely, Benkler is aware of this reality, and he minimizes this to emphasize the epochal change that social production signifies and its importance to “individual freedom, a more genuinely participatory political system, a critical culture, and social justice.”<sup>34</sup> Benkler does briefly comment on political economy when he observes that expanding workplace democracy and creating a more egalitarian distribution of wealth have historically had to confront the sheer efficiency of proprietary market-based production.

While market-based production is surely efficient, such an account ignores that the wealth of western liberal democracies during the post-war period was a result of a mixture of free markets, state funding, and regulated labor markets. After all, the precursor to the Internet was ARPANET, an endeavor entirely funded by the state. The state continues to play a large role in production, research, and development. The economist Mariana Mazzucato<sup>35</sup> recently found that many of the key technological developments of the last few years came about because the state invested in risky innovations before they demonstrated their profitability. Adjudicating what is and what is not neoliberal, or market liberal, is not important for LIS in developing a theory of socially-generated information; however, acknowledging that markets are always embedded

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33. Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, 7.

34. *Ibid.*, 8.

35. Mariana Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State* (London: Demos 2011).

within a particular social and governmental structure is fundamental. The producers of socially-generated information continuously utilize resources (e.g., educational institutions, public infrastructure) that are embedded in specific sets of market relationships that are reliant on the state for particular informational commodities to exist at all (e.g., intellectual property). Benkler's indifference to these issues means he is of little use to libraries interested in building an infrastructure for a democratic knowledge commons.

Karl Polanyi's landmark work *The Great Transformation*<sup>36</sup> can serve as a helpful guide in this analytic endeavor. Polanyi argued that an idealized market separate from society has never existed; markets are always contingent on the social forces of the society in which they exist. As with any popular conceptual framework, or widely cited historical work, specific aspects of Polanyi's thought have been criticized,<sup>37</sup> and the strengths and limitations of his framework for knowledge have been explored.<sup>38</sup> Although Benkler is correct in asserting that social production opens up dramatic new collaborative opportunities for the production of information, to view it as being a form of "non-market" production is to ignore Polanyi's insight that markets are always embedded in society.

A Polanyian perspective fits well within the literature that Robert McChesney<sup>39</sup> calls the Political Economy of Communication (PEC) and Birdsall's political economy of librarianship. PEC "evaluates media and communication systems by determining how they affect political and social power in society and whether they are, on balance, forces for

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36. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2001).

37. Charles Kindleberger, "The Great Transformation by Karl Polanyi," *Daedalus*, 103, no. 1 (1974); Nancy Fraser, "A Triple Movement?: Parsing the Politics of Crisis After Polanyi," *New Left Review*, 81, (2013).

38. Bob Jessop, "Knowledge as a Fictitious Commodity: Insights and Limits of a Polanyian Perspective," in *Reading Karl Polanyi for the Twenty-First Century: Market Economy as a Political Project*, ed. Ayse Bugra, and Kaan Ağartan (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2007).

39. Robert McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 63.

or against democracy and successful self-government. This critical or explicit normative basis distinguishes it from related fields like media economics or media law.”<sup>40</sup> In addition to examining the institutions and markets that shape communication systems, PEC emphasizes the essential role of government in the development and maintenance of these systems. A political economy of librarianship in the vein of Birdsall’s proposal would surely adopt a similar perspective by focusing on how libraries are a force for democracy. A Polanyian perspective moves the debate away from one about an abstract “free market,” or a “non-market” form of production; instead, it shifts the focus to a conversation about the kinds of market-based societies that can be built, the forms of information production that are the most socially just, and the resources needed to create a democratic knowledge commons.

LIS must develop a robust normative theory of democracy for socially-generated information so that an ideologically limited and deterministic discourse about information technology does not crowd out libraries and educational institutions’ public mission and limit the potential ways in which this mission can pursue new democratic goals. Socially-generated information is a substantive new development, but its use can be shaped by public policy. LIS is well positioned to play a large role in using new forms of knowledge production to promote a more just and participatory communicative democracy. As more information is produced in distributed networks that have new and ambiguous relationships to the specific geographical communities that libraries traditionally serve, it is LIS’s responsibility to articulate a vision of how new methods of information production can protect information as a public and common good, help in a small degree to decommodify the informational labor which is the value created by socially-generated information, and deepen participatory democracy. LIS and its institutions are well positioned to fill the informational gaps left by markets and deterministic conceptions of “the Internet,” but only if it articulates

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40. *Ibid.*, 64.

a positive democratic vision that acknowledges the changing economic and communicative dynamics of information.

### **The Horizon of Access**

In order for democratic participation to occur, the material infrastructure and physical networks that socially-generated information requires must be readily and easily available for use to all in society. Therefore, the material, social, and legal limitations that inhibit or prevent democratic access must be overcome. Despite the rhetoric about the immaterial and limitless nature of online communication, the Internet is a collection of physical networks and systems that consist of material resources that place restraints on the nature of access. To state that access for all must be guaranteed is simple enough—to unpack what exactly equal access means (and the allocation of resources that it would entail) requires further examination. The Oxford English Dictionary defines access as it relates to “entrance or approach” as “[t]he power, opportunity, permission, or right to come near or into contact with someone or something; admittance; admission.”<sup>41</sup> This definition suggests that access be thought of as something more than material; concepts such as power and rights suggest a discursive framework in which institutions and social subjects instantiate how these abstract concepts are enacted as social practice. Institutions must define the nature and limits of access and social subjects must articulate an understanding of the importance of access (e.g., “as a citizen my right to access information is an essential part of democratic participation”).

Article IV of the American Library Association’s Bill of Rights states that “[l]ibraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.”<sup>42</sup>

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41. Oxford English Dictionary, “access, n,” OED Online, March 2015, Oxford University Press, accessed April 24, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1028?rskey=LvkstP&result=1>.

42. American Library Association, “Library Bill of Rights,” January 23, 1996, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>.

Situated within the context of the other articles in the document, the “free access to ideas” means that libraries should not censoriously limit what users can access based on content; in other words, users should consume the broadest possible spectrum of culture, ideas, and opinions available via libraries. During the twentieth century, American media critics recognized that corporate media ownership limited the participatory potential of mediums such as print, radio, and television.<sup>43</sup> The participatory nature of the Internet has made it easier to access and respond to a wide range of media and culture; however, the capacities that such access entails remain vague. I argue that there are three constraints that inhibit equal access: material inhibitions, legal constraints, and exogenous factors that limit the capacity of all participants to act once material access is guaranteed. The literature on access to information is vast; therefore, the following discussion will be limited to libraries and their relevance to the proposed analytical framework.

Although the digital divide has diminished due to the expansion of information technology and networks since the 1990s, it remains a consistent feature of American society.<sup>44</sup> Internet inequality persists, even in a developed nation like the US, in the form of slower network speeds in many less prosperous communities, communities of color, and rural areas.<sup>45</sup> Communicative inequality persists in the form of limited access to the Internet outside of the home, and in diminishing leisure time within the context of a deep recession. This has meant that the most active and prominent Internet contributors tend to be middle/upper class, white, and male.<sup>46</sup> Public libraries have experienced an increased demand to provide basic services. Citizens who do not personally own

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43. Ben H. Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004); Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

44. Strover, “The US Digital Divide.”

45. *Ibid.*, 115.

46. Linda Jackson, et al. “Race, Gender, and Information Technology Use: The New Digital Divide,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 11, no. 4 (August 2008): 437-442.

communications technologies frequently rely on public libraries for access to the Internet while libraries struggle with declining budgets that are the result of austerity policies.<sup>47</sup> If access to newer technological and democratic forums is not cast in the light of democratic and universal access, the opportunities to participate for those without—or with less—access will be diminished. In the twenty-first century, universal and affordable access to the Internet must be viewed as a public good and right if socially-generated information is to be evaluated for its democratic potential.

The public policy debate surrounding material inhibitions to access must also examine the issues that surround the potentially monopolistic control of communications technology networks and infrastructure. These communications resources are maintained by large multinational corporations whose primary obligations are to their shareholders, not to the public or to a broadly defined public interest. For example, when home access to Internet services is controlled by a corporation that distributes television content, there is a clear interest on behalf of that corporation to try to limit new competing methods of delivering that content into homes. The public policy questions that surround these issues are complicated because they need to reconcile conflicting commercial and public interests; however, it is important that a broadly construed public/democratic interest be promoted. An issue like Net neutrality (the policy of Internet Service Providers not to discriminate amongst users) is a key public policy flashpoint in this instance, because it demonstrates that normative questions about how the Internet should be regulated are not the product of some abstract Internet that has a set of immutable characteristics, but are instead shaped by public debate about the type of democratic and communicative society that is most desirable. Despite the transformative power of the Internet, remarkably few corporations produce the content and own the platforms through which all of this communication takes place. It follows that, absent a

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47. *Ibid.*, 118-119.

public policy that strives for universal material access, these corporate and state actors lack incentives to make access universal.

Incumbent corporate actors have strong incentives to shape the regulatory framework in ways that limit competition and enhance their own profits. This power can accrue to very few actors due to what has been called Metcalfe's law, named for Bob Metcalfe who posited that "the usefulness of a network increases at an accelerating rate as you add each new person to it."<sup>48</sup> Minus regulation, the tendencies towards monopoly seem evident (e.g., the more searches Google processes, the more valuable it becomes and the greater the barriers to entry for new firms trying to develop a competing product) and provide LIS with a substantive opening to explore how libraries can act to fill the spaces left open by these market forces. PEC can help make these arguments, as well as the history of the state's involvement in the development of the Internet. Such logic leads to antitrust legislation and an awareness of the continual potential for monopolistic control of key aspects of information production and distribution.

Another key flashpoint in the information economy has been the debates about intellectual property and copyright that scholars/public intellectuals like Siva Vaidhyanathan and Lawrence Lessig have worked on since the 1990s.<sup>49</sup> These scholars find that litigious corporations or state actors can easily stifle creative activity by creating intellectual property regimes that do not allow for users to playfully reuse and create culture that has a minimal impact on the market for the product being used. Although Lessig finds that the prospects for amending U.S. copyright law are poor, he argues that projects such as the *Creative Commons* can provide cultural producers with the tools to "see more clearly the freedoms they have with the creative work and the restrictions that the creator continues to insist upon."<sup>50</sup> A workable balance

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48. Cited in McChesney, *Digital Disconnect*, 132.

49. Lessig, "Getting Our Values around Copyright Right," Vaidhyanathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs*.

50. Lessig, "Getting Our Values Around Copyright Right," 36.

between the interests of producers and consumers must be achieved through public debate.

Assuming that material and legal access is universally assured, the ability of social subjects to participate in socially generated information will be determined by a range of external social factors, such as familiarity and comfort with technology, education and training, and the time to spend on generating content. Although many non-profits have created grant-funded programs to improve computing and Internet skills, Sharon Stover found that these inconsistent funding mechanisms created a “feast-or-famine method of living from grant to grant” and that a serious and sustained investment in digital divide literacy efforts is needed.<sup>51</sup> A key technological development is the role that mobile communications are now playing. Although the availability of mobile technology provides connectivity to more people, mobile connectivity is slower, more expensive, and more difficult to use for certain purposes (e.g., job applications, longer writing). In short, access to tools is not sufficient. Sustained efforts to fund technology education and policies that allow for the time to participate in creating socially generated information are an important part of guaranteeing equal access.

Issues related to material inhibitions, legal constraints, and external factors that limit the capacity of all participants to equally participate coalesce in a strand of interdisciplinary inquiry that has sought to articulate the key aspects of a “knowledge” or “information commons” modeled on conceptions of traditional resource commons. Hess and Ostrom<sup>52</sup> argue that knowledge is a non-rival—or public—good because one “person’s use of knowledge... (does) not subtract from another person’s capacity to use it.”<sup>53</sup> Nancy Kranich contends that powerful forces are acting to enclose an emerging knowledge commons and argues that this enclosure can be countered by creating open access to

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51. Stover, “The US Digital Divide,” 116.

52. Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom, “An Overview of the Knowledge Commons,” in *Understanding Knowledge As a Commons: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 9.

53. Hess and Ostrom, “An Overview of the Knowledge Commons,” 9.

scholarship and digital repositories. Kranich explores the open access movement as a countervailing force to corporate publishers that have acted against public informational interests by charging high prices for serials and databases that users and scholars deem essential.<sup>54</sup> Librarians have been at the forefront of the open access movement, because as publishers consolidate into fewer firms they are able to ask for more money from libraries that are straining under already limited and shrinking budgets to purchase the serials and databases upon which users and scholars rely. As a result, the owners of the most widely cited scholarly journals can extract large rents through their ownership of intellectual property rights.<sup>55</sup> Many open access advocates have argued for making publicly financed research available for free to the general public as part of a knowledge commons—the existence of publicly financed research being inaccessible to libraries and the general public being an obvious case of enclosure of a public good.

Christine Borgman's observation that libraries form an "invisible information infrastructure" is a helpful way to think about the role that libraries can play in developing a new knowledge commons.<sup>56</sup> In order to develop, preserve, and sustain new forms of social information production, libraries are ideally positioned to create an infrastructure for these new forms. Because of libraries' historical commitments to democracy, their potential role in the development of a knowledge commons has been acknowledged by scholars.<sup>57</sup> If libraries are to achieve these goals, the invisible infrastructure of libraries must become more visible. The material limits to participating can be overcome as librarians partner with other actors to build this infrastructure.

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54. Nancy Kranich, "Countering Enclosure: Reclaiming the Knowledge Commons," in *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

55. Nancy Kranich, "Countering Enclosure."

56. Christine Borgman, "The Invisible Library: Paradox of the Global Information Infrastructure," *Library Trends* 51, no. 4 (2003): 652-74.

57. Nancy Kranich, "Countering Enclosure: Reclaiming the Knowledge Commons," in *Understanding Knowledge As a Commons: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

LIS must advocate for the resources to provide material access to all, to participate in the larger public debates about how to guarantee universal access to knowledge and culture, and how regulatory issues (such as intellectual property and Net Neutrality) have a large impact on access to information and democracy. However, a fully developed democratic analysis of socially-generated information requires an analysis that goes beyond questions of access and looks at the process of information production itself. Although mainstream economics has abandoned a quantitative labor theory of value, one could easily forget that it is through the application of human labor power that knowledge, culture, and information are produced. The material and affective characteristics of this production are unique to the digital age; however, no analysis of this production is complete without crossing into the realm of production.

### **The Horizon of Production**

Socially-generated information is always the result of labor. This statement might strike many as odd, because most people do not consider, for example, adding content to social media “work.” Laurel Ptak’s Wages for Facebook campaign raises the issues of such information production in stark terms: “THEY SAY IT’S FRIENDSHIP. WE SAY IT’S UNWAGED WORK. WITH EVERY LIKE, CHAT, TAG OR POKE OUR SUBJECTIVITY TURNS THEM A PROFIT. THEY CALL IT SHARING. WE CALL IT STEALING. WE’VE BEEN BOUND BY THEIR TERMS OF SERVICE FAR TOO LONG—IT’S TIME FOR OUR TERMS [caps in original].”<sup>58</sup>

Ptak’s campaign suggests that any democratic theory of socially-generated information must address the complicated questions surrounding informational labor. As economic production becomes informationalized, and as information becomes commodified in new ways, the labor

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58. Laurel Ptak, “Wages for Facebook,” accessed March 3, 2015, <http://wagesforfacebook.com>.

that produces information must be addressed if LIS is to have a substantive democratic theory of socially-generated information.

If the Wages For Facebook campaign is a political perspective—and not actually a specific demand as Ptak argues<sup>59</sup>—then libraries must think about how such a perspective can be enacted. Ptak’s campaign borrows from the Wages for Housework campaign from the 1970s echoing the text of Silvia Federici’s “Wages Against Housework.”<sup>60</sup> Liberal democratic theory has traditionally focused on participation in the public realm and what political philosophers have called *negative freedoms*.<sup>61</sup> When it has turned its attention to economic inequality, it has focused on questions of distribution and incentives (i.e., Rawls’ *difference principle*), not on the sphere of production.<sup>62</sup> This inattention is incompatible with critical theory’s insistence that human emancipation inform everyday life and relationships. While the commodification of sociality by Facebook may strike one as a minor concern given the many grave challenges confronting the planet, inattention to these complicated new forms of knowledge production leaves LIS unable to provide guidance on how libraries can further democratize the production of socially-generated information. To analyze this we must shift our attention to what Karl Marx famously called the “hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice ‘No admittance except on business.’”<sup>63</sup>

There is a vast economics and management literature on the role of knowledge and information within various organizational forms and

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59. Laurel Ptak, “Wages for Facebook.”

60. Alex Jung, “Wages for Facebook,” *Dissent Magazine*, April 2014, 47-50; Silvia Federici, *Wages against Housework*, London: Power of Women Collective, <https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/09/15/silvia-federici-wages-against-housework/>.

61. Isiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

62. G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

63. Karl Marx et al., *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books in association with *New Left Review*, 1990), 280.

firms.<sup>64</sup> A critique of informational labor in late capitalism has developed from within a strand of Marxist theory first developed by the Italian thinker Antonio Negri's reading of Marx. In *Capital*, Marx observed that "[t]he maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital."<sup>65</sup> In the *Grundrisse* Marx argues that, as the capitalist mode of production becomes generalized throughout society, specific commodities start to bear less of a discernible relation to the specific forms of labor required to produce them.<sup>66</sup> Through this process capital accrues and becomes more concentrated in the hands of fewer capitalists while simultaneously being generalized throughout society in a pool of common knowledge—what Marx calls the *general intellect*—that can then be redeployed by capital for the production of more surplus value (or profit in classical and neo-classical economics).<sup>67</sup> Autonomist Marxism emerged from a reading of Marx that focused on this process of generalization—specifically stressing the importance of social reproduction in the process of capital accumulation. Capital could not generate profits if it were not for the unwaged labor and production that has historically occurred outside of formal work structures (e.g., housework, child care). This theoretical move places actors not traditionally included in Marxian class frameworks (e.g., students, housewives, the unemployed) in a central role in class struggle.<sup>68</sup>

The idea that production and consumption have blurred is not confined to Autonomist Marxist analysis. In 1980, the celebrated futurist

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64. John Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000); Ronald Day, "Social Capital, Value, and Measure: Antonio Negri's Challenge to Capitalism," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 53, no. 12 (2002): 1074-1082.

65. Marx, *Capital*, 718.

66. Peterson, "Loser Generated Content"; Nick Dyer-Withford, "Autonomist Marxism and the Information Society," <https://libcom.org/library/nick-dyer-witheford-autonomist-marxism-and-the-information-society-treason-pamphlet>.

67. Peterson, "Loser Generated Content."

68. Ronald Day, "Social Capital, Value, and Measure."

Alvin Toffler used the term “prosumer” to describe this process;<sup>69</sup> more recently, observers such as Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson have examined this blurring of production and consumption and argue that it is a fundamental aspect of capitalism.<sup>70</sup> A casual reader of the business press would find it difficult to avoid discussions of the concept of the “sharing economy” and new ventures such as Uber and Airbnb. Although such constructions create a compelling analytical lens, Tiziana Terranova cautions that the

increasingly blurred territory between production and consumption, work and cultural expression... does not signal the recomposition of the alienated Marxist worker. The Internet does not automatically turn every user into an active producer, and every worker into a creative subject. The process whereby production and consumption are reconfigured within the category of free labour signals the unfolding of another logic of value, whose operations need careful analysis.<sup>71</sup>

Terranova finds that the autonomist “social factory” construct accounts for the numerous ways that the general intellect creates a resource pool for capital. Autonomist Marxist perspectives recognize that when knowledge becomes subsumed under a market-based regime of informationalized capital accumulation the distinctions between labor and consumption blur; they become increasingly generalized and dispersed and are then “reterritorialized” by capital for the generation of profit. This general process of knowledge consumption and production is crystallized in what Bob Jessop calls *fictive capital* (e.g., the securitization of intellectual property rights).<sup>72</sup> This begs the question: if social production is simply a “social factory” ceaselessly creating value for

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69. George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson, “Production, Consumption, Prosumption: the Nature of Capitalism in the Age of the Digital ‘Prosumer,’” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10, no. 1 (2010): 17.

70. *Ibid.*, 14.

71. Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 75.

72. Bob Jessop, “Knowledge as a Fictitious Commodity.”

capital, how can public institutions like libraries broaden democratic participation in the realm of socially-generated information production?

Commentators such as Christian Fuchs have gone so far as to argue that socially-generated resources like Wikipedia and the Diaspora Project are “communist cells entangled into antagonistic relations with capitalism” and that, although these projects have a “mystified character,” they contain this revolutionary potential because “[c]ommunism needs spaces to materialize itself as a movement. Struggles can manifest themselves in the form of noncommercial Internet projects, watchdog projects, public search engines, the legalization of file sharing, or the introduction of a basic income.”<sup>73</sup> Such statements highlight the difficulties of using the autonomist social factory concept to guide community action. By reintroducing class struggle as the sole fulcrum around which the Internet and socially-generated information will be made more egalitarian, theorists like Fuchs deemphasize the important role that state policy can play in shaping and defining the nature of information as a commodity. While using the social factory concept to inform thinking about the production of socially-generated information is a useful starting point, these ideas need to be balanced by Karl Polanyi’s insights about the commodification of labor and by the political economy of communication/librarianship because they argue that institutions can create communicative spaces not subject to market forces. The messy political and economic questions that a political economy of librarianship and/or communication necessarily confronts examine how to craft policies that affect the institutions of capitalism that actually exist. Libraries and public institutions must conceptualize ways to further democratize the production of knowledge and to, as Polanyi argued, go beyond the market by using society to curb its power.<sup>74</sup> This perspective would move away from emphasizing a dialectal transcendence and shift analysis to

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73. Christian Fuchs, “Class and exploitation on the Internet,” in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 222.

74. Margaret Somers and Fred Block, “The Return of Karl Polanyi,” *Dissent Magazine*, April 2014, 33.

how libraries and librarianship confront these issues “on the ground,” accepting that libraries are ambiguous and contested institutions.

Although socially-generated information can be considered to be the product of labor, much of this information is available to be treated as commodities because newer technological forms make legible a range of interactions that were once illegible and more difficult to commodify (e.g., talking to a friend on Facebook). Although this raises important questions about privacy (to be addressed in the communicative horizon section of this essay), it becomes apparent that an initial shift for libraries would be to see socially-generated information as a product of labor. On this subject, PEC “has tended to situate its object within the sphere of consumption.”<sup>75</sup> When Mosco focuses PEC on the sphere of production, he uses the work of Harry Braverman to examine how “capital acts to *separate* conception from execution, (and) skill from the raw ability to carry out a task.”<sup>76</sup> The scientific management of Frederick Winslow Taylor exemplified this process in the Industrial Era by reducing complex human labor processes to simple and repetitive tasks. Socially-generated information is produced under a different labor regime and in a distributed and generalized manner; therefore, an avenue for democratizing the production of this information would be to examine how these forms of production can act to separate, or merge, conception and execution.

In Yochai Benkler’s description of social production, he finds that the “quintessential instance of commons-based production has been free software.”<sup>77</sup> A collaborative form of production in which people freely associate to share knowledge and expertise to build a common project offers the promise of merging conception and execution; however, such forms of production occur within an institutional context. Libraries can exert influence over the types of socially-generated information that is

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75. Mosco, *The Political Economy of Information*, 139-140.

76. *Ibid.*, 139.

77. Yochai Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 63.

considered important, the nature of the information produced, and the content of the knowledge preserved and made available for the public. For many, the knowledge-based economy raised the hope that newer forms of industrial relations would supplant the hierarchy and impersonality of industrial production.<sup>78</sup> The emergence of social production is concomitant with increased precarity for workers in the global north and ever increasing levels of global inequality.<sup>79</sup> In a market-based economy, labor and other commodities are sold in a marketplace that prices the value of specific commodities for their perceived capacity to produce profit or utility or to fulfill necessity (e.g., food, shelter). By bracketing off a sphere of production to be “non-market,” Benkler disembeds it from market exchange. With respect to labor and production, the insights of PEC can help LIS examine how a countervailing movement for the protection of society might develop. The Wages for Facebook political perspective can offer some guidance on this issue, but libraries’ positions as public institutions can enable them to use their power to encourage the development of specific forms of social production and new ways to conceptualize and articulate that production as a public issue. Many libraries have hosted community “hackathons” or Wikipedia editing events that call on an ethic of civic volunteerism to add to the general knowledge. A new approach would be to acknowledge that this knowledge production adds value and may even be encouraged with compensation.

When United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron suggested that libraries be administered by uncompensated volunteers instead of librarians as a part of his “big society” initiative, the library world was quick to condemn this disregard for the professional status of library workers.<sup>80</sup> A similar spirit of volunteerism is called upon by libraries and

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78. Benkler explores how “third way” industrial relations literature tried to move away from hierarchical production and how peer-to-peer production circumvents bureaucracy. *Wealth of Networks*, 138-139.

79. Thomas Piketty and Arthur Goldhammer, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

80. *The Guardian*, “Oxfordshire Cuts Test ‘Big Society’ as Librarians are

universities when it comes to socially-generated information projects. Peter Levine describes a civic engagement project developed at the University of Maryland that sought to involve economically disadvantaged adolescents in a valuable research project to produce a deliberative website to address the causes of obesity.<sup>81</sup> Levine admires “commons such as public libraries, community gardens, the Internet, and bodies of scholarly research because they encourage *voluntary*, diverse, creative activity.”<sup>82</sup> LIS must add a horizon of analysis that can discuss the value of labor in the production of this kind of information commons. These considerations may not always imply that users can be compensated for the production of knowledge with a social value, but only by beginning with the premise that labor produces culture and knowledge can libraries think about how their own knowledge commons projects can become more socially just.

Libraries traditionally collected material produced by the large culture industries, smaller publishers, and other entities that produced records, documents, and information deemed potentially important by librarians working autonomously. The publishing industry, although mostly owned by large multinational firms, created a framework in which the labors of creators, editors, and numerous other actors were often compensated. The most used socially-generated information sites and platforms (e.g., Google, Facebook) are owned by corporations that create spaces and services that bring in users to produce the information that they then sell to other parties, or use to run advertisements. Enormous amounts of information are being created in these systems, and the thought of collecting even a fraction of this information and organizing it into an information commons of some kind faces myriad practical difficulties. What is worth collecting? Who owns the rights to this content? Could

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Replaced with Volunteers,” <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/jun/02/oxfordshire-library-staff-replaced-volunteers>.

81. Peter Levine, “Collective Action, Civic Engagement, and the Knowledge Commons,” in *Understanding Knowledge As a Commons: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007).

82. *Ibid*, 250 (emphasis added).

we imagine a public institution paying someone for creating a Wiki or community information portal?

Only by insisting that cultural/knowledge production should be valued as a newer form of labor can LIS examine questions of what is socially just and guide library policy and action. The Marxian tradition and PEC are well attuned to inequalities in the realm of production and have complicated the classical liberal democratic (e.g., Jefferson, Tocqueville, Mill) approach that focuses on communicative subjects in the public realm. Although this line of analysis has been able identify how the interests of capital are personified in newer communicative forms (such as socially-generated information), it does not provide libraries a positive normative account of how such forms could be used to broaden and deepen democracy.

### The Horizon of Communicative Speech

When discussing the role of speech online, a great deal of commentary has focused on differentiating between what Richard Stallman, one of the founders of the FOSS movement, described as “free as in speech (ideas), not free beer (things).”<sup>83</sup> Although democracy is often discussed in formalistic terms (e.g., ballots, governmental structures) the work of thinkers such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas has created a widely shared understanding of democracy as being “government by discussion,” and governance is inextricably concerned with both ideas and things. The stakes of such a connection are demonstrated in Amartya Sen’s finding that no *functioning* democracy has ever experienced a major famine.<sup>84</sup> For Sen, this is because democracy creates incentives for elites (who would otherwise be insulated from the consequences of famine) to respond to popular demands. This is what Sen calls the “informational

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83. Lawrence Lessig, “Free, as in Beer,” *Wired*, September 2006, <http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.09/posts.html?pg=6>.

84. Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

role of democracy.”<sup>85</sup> This informational role is a public, deliberative discussion about the consequences of policies, and it creates a space in which empirical questions of public importance can be debated, shared, and adjudicated. The normative imperatives of a democratic framework for evaluating socially-generated information must situate democratic deliberation as an important aspect of production and access; however, the creation and maintenance of a public sphere in which open discussion works towards mutual understanding is necessary.

Whatever one’s opinion of a company like Facebook, the empirical reality is that socially-generated information platforms are spaces in which ample online public discussion occurs. One need not accept the idea of “Twitter revolutions” or be a technological determinist to concede the importance of these platforms and networks. Given that these are for-profit companies that have an economic incentive to shape the content and character of the information shared and spread, it raises important questions for LIS as it interacts with the information, knowledge, and culture produced by socially-generated platforms. A democratic theory of socially-generated information must embrace a normative theory of communicative rationality that articulates characteristics that would constitute a democratic public sphere. Such a perspective moves beyond the stasis that Buschman identified as plaguing LIS writing on democracy.<sup>86</sup>

Any discussion of the public sphere and communicative rationality must begin with the work of Jürgen Habermas. The scope of Habermas’s work is vast and only key ideas related to the public sphere, communicative action, and LIS will be discussed here.<sup>87</sup> For Habermas “the performative attitude of participants in interaction, who coordinate their

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85. Ibid, 344.

86. Buschman, *Democratic Theory in Library and Information Science*.

87. For a thorough treatment of the applicability of Habermas’s ideas to LIS see Buschman’s “The Integrity and Obstnacy of Intellectual Creations”: Jürgen Habermas and Librarianship’s Theoretical Literature,” *Library Quarterly*, 76, no.3 (2006): 270-299; Gloria J. Leckie, “Three Perspectives on Libraries as Public Space,” *Felicitar* 50, no. 6 (December 2004): 233-236.

plans for action by coming to an understanding about something in the world”<sup>88</sup> is a key aspect of communicative reason. It is through speech acts and validity claims that the Habermasian lifeworld emerges as a situated entity. Habermas engages many of the key critiques of enlightenment that echo what Max Weber called purposive rationality—the idea that enlightenment rationality is a cold, impersonal, and oppressive “technique and calculation, of organization and administration” that leaves social subjects disenchanting.<sup>89</sup> This “cold” rationality has been the target of varied enlightenment critics such as Nietzsche, Adorno, Foucault, and Derrida. Habermas’s theory is not focused on the “cold” questions of discovering the empirically true; instead, it sees “the dialectic of knowing and not knowing as embedded within the dialectic of successful and unsuccessful mutual understanding.”<sup>90</sup> The development of situated spaces to facilitate a communicative exchange that works towards mutual understanding is of primary concern to Habermas and to any democratic theory of social-generated information.

It is Habermas’s work on the public sphere that has cast a long shadow over democratic theory and is arguably his most important concept for LIS. The Habermasian public sphere is an entity that is not embedded in the economic sphere or formally in the state; it is “rather one of discursive relations, a theater for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling.”<sup>91</sup> The public sphere is created “when private citizens form to create a public body.”<sup>92</sup> In Nancy Fraser’s examination of the public sphere she finds that, although “something like Habermas’s idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic practice,”<sup>93</sup> it requires a “critical interrogation” if it is to

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88. Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

89. Thomas McCarthy, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol 1* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), xviii.

90. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 324.

91. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere.”

92. Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox, and Frank Lennox, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” *New German Critique*, (1974): 49-55.

93. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 57.

successfully guide democratic discussion. For Fraser, the problem with Habermas's public sphere is its *bourgeois masculinist* conceptual baggage. The public sphere concept assumes a space that is open and accessible to all. Even if formal openness is guaranteed, excluding "social inequalities in deliberation means proceeding as if they don't exist when they do." For Fraser, "such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates."<sup>94</sup> Fraser proposes the development of *subaltern counterpublics* drawing on the history of "subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—(that) have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics."<sup>95</sup> For Fraser, these *subaltern counterpublics* have a dual character in that "they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment... [and *subaltern counterpublics*] also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics."<sup>96</sup>

Fraser's observations about how supposedly open and participatory public spaces that assume formal equality can reproduce hierarchy clearly apply to recent findings about the degree to which white men tend to dominate discourse online.<sup>97</sup> The Internet can now easily be a site of harassment, leading popular authors to go so far as to declare that women are unwelcome online.<sup>98</sup> Importantly, Fraser's subaltern counterpublic sphere emphasizes the importance of deliberation and debate and Habermas's original stress on communication towards mutual understanding while insisting that such spaces are embedded in the web of social relations that make up late capitalist liberal democratic societies. In short, a democratic space that uses socially-generated information will have to address messy procedural realities to insure that the ideal

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94. *Ibid.*, 64.

95. *Ibid.*, 67.

96. *Ibid.*, 68.

97. Linda Jackson, et al. "Race, Gender, and Information Technology Use."

98. Amanda Hess, "Why Women Aren't Welcome on the Internet," *Pacific Standard*, accessed January 6, 2014, <http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/women-arent-welcome-internet-72170>.

of communication towards mutual understanding is preserved while acknowledging how, in Fraser's words, "inequality affects relations among publics in late capitalist societies, how publics are differently empowered or segmented, and how some are involuntarily enclaved and subordinated to others."<sup>99</sup>

Embedded in the concept of the public sphere is the notion that there is a private sphere. A thorough examination of the issues related to privacy is beyond the scope of this essay; however, a communicative democracy would articulate a sense of where the line between the private and public realms should be drawn. Feminist theory has demonstrated how issues that are often considered "private" in the traditional male-dominated polis need to become part of the public debate in order to be addressed.<sup>100</sup> Socially-generated information blurs some of the traditional distinctions between the public and private realm in that it creates a record of a range of interactions that were once illegible to bosses, corporations, governments, and citizens. A public sphere that facilitates an ideal space for democratic communicative exchange would actively reinforce a normative commitment ensuring wide participation and a sanction-free space where ideas can be debated and explored in relation to one another. For thinkers like Richard Sennett and Hannah Arendt, the public realm is a space where strangers meet. This incomplete knowledge affords a degree of anonymity for communicative subjects to freely discuss and debate ideas.<sup>101</sup> Socially-generated information, or "big data," is frequently being used predictively by authorities and the state. This use raises important questions about privacy and civil liberties.<sup>102</sup> Any socially-generated information project within the library

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99. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 77.

100. *Ibid.*, 77.

101. Richard Sennett, "The Public Realm," Richard Sennett's Website, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb>; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

102. Kate Crawford and Jason Schultz, "Big Data and Due Process: Toward a Framework to Redress Predictive Privacy Harms," *Boston College Law Review* 55, 1 (2014): 93-128.

must clearly articulate a privacy policy and inform users about how the information is being created, stored, and analyzed.

A refined theory of the public sphere and communicative action provides LIS with powerful normative tools to complicate discussions about democracy and to move beyond the eighteenth-century concepts and ideas that Buschman identified as continuing to predominate in LIS democratic theory.<sup>103</sup> The previous horizons of analysis demonstrate how, in an online environment, this kind of public sphere can only emerge if potential participants have the access, the time, and the capacity to participate in communicative exchange towards mutual understanding. The creation of socially-generated information involves both the materiality of information technology and the creative labor of communication.

### **The Framework as a Guide to Progressive Community Action and Community Development**

In this essay I have argued that socially-generated information is a new phenomenon and in order to evaluate the democratic potential of a particular project the accessibility, the process of production, and the communicative terrain upon which the action occurs must be carefully considered. I have identified three key horizons of analysis and I have argued for their importance in thinking about how libraries can expand democratic participation and further democratize twenty-first century capitalism. Readers may well have their own considerations to add to those outlined here—any such list is necessarily limited and open to contestation. This framework should benefit libraries engaged in progressive community action projects by providing a set of democratic considerations specifically designed to examine socially-generated information. Some of the most important recent thinkers about global development (e.g., Sen, Nussbaum) have argued that normative frameworks that can be used to evaluate community development outcomes

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103. Buschman, *Democratic Theory in Library Information Science*.

must be created so that conversations and empirically informed debate about what policies encourage human flourishing can be prioritized. Progressive community action on the part of libraries necessitates robust theoretical debate about normative goals and aims. I hope in some small measure to have contributed to such a debate here. I also hope that I have provided libraries and librarians a useful conceptual toolkit for thinking about issues related to progressive community action and for evaluating community development outcomes when using socially-generated information.

A key point of complexity arises when thinking about the role of the public sphere in relation to the role of information production. A key concept underlying the Habermasian public sphere is the idea that it is a space set apart from both the market and the private realm where social subjects “behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs” but come together to form a public body.<sup>104</sup> However, I have argued in this essay that the realm of production must be analyzed and that the labor that creates economic value in socially-generated information must be considered if a public communicative space/commons is to be developed as a part of progressive community action. In the 1960s, Habermas found that in a social welfare state mass democracy that groups have

needs which can expect no satisfaction from a self-regulating market now tend towards a regulation by the state. The public sphere, which must now mediate these demands, becomes a field for the competition of interests... [resulting] in a more or less unconcealed manner to the compromise of conflicting private interests... With the interweaving of the public and private realm, not only do the political authorities assume certain functions in the sphere of commodity exchange and social labor, but conversely social powers now assume political functions.<sup>105</sup>

The post-World War II period mass democracy in the West required the further development of political interest groups to organize and express

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104. Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,” *New German Critique*, No. 3 (1974): 49-55.

105. *Ibid.*, 54.

public opinion (e.g., labor unions, political parties, non-governmental organizations), along with media and cultural institutions that maintained public-oriented missions (e.g., public broadcast media, libraries). The trends that communications scholars like McChesney and Mosco examine all point to the importance of subsidizing the production of information in the public interest. A twenty-first century public sphere requires open access to all participants, remuneration for labor that produces necessary resources, and a space that fosters a free communicative exchange. Libraries can play a large role in providing resources for all of these activities. Such action is a key way that libraries can participate in community development projects.

The Internet age has seen the decline of traditional journalistic outlets because the economic model that sustained them during the twentieth century has proven insufficient in the twenty-first. Robert McChesney and John Nichols argue that “[s]aving newspapers may be impossible. But we can save journalism. Step one is to begin debating ways for enlightened public subsidies to provide a competitive and independent digital news media.”<sup>106</sup> Libraries can play a particularly important role in this broader conversation and could act to fill many of the spaces that commercial information interests no longer address. A way to apply this essay’s democratic framework would be for libraries to support new socially-generated information forums and platforms for specific communities. Below, I list a few initial proposals that libraries could explore if they wished to place this perspective into action.

- Libraries could create employment programs that would pay unemployed/underemployed citizens to help build and create the content in a community information commons online. Librarians would assist these “reporters” in their research. These “reporters” would be paid the prevailing living wage to attend community functions, school board meetings, and city council

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106. Robert McChesney and John Nichols, “Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols on Federal Subsidies for Journalism,” *Washington Post*, October 30, 2009, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/22/AR2009102203960.html>.

meetings. By creating and maintaining a community-generated information commons libraries could play a role in building this crucial aspect of the democratic information infrastructure that market forces are neglecting. Although the political culture of the United States is suspicious of public subsidy, a program of this sort could also address employment in many communities by updating the logic behind Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Project Administration in the 1930s or by acknowledging the role that public subsidy of the post office played in supporting the distribution of print media in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The content of such a commons may well be very different from commercial news, but libraries' institutional histories and their location in specific geographical communities could greatly assist this process.

- Further research needs to be conducted into the ideal conditions for communicative rationality to occur. For example, there has been a great deal in the press about the vitriolic threats that women and people of color receive online when participating in public discourse. How can such threats be reduced? What external factors play a role? How to facilitate understanding across difference? What role could/should libraries play in trying to shape democratic participation and this type of civic engagement?
- Libraries must continue their role in storing and preserving vital public information and continue to collect the idiosyncratic and local forms of culture that may be lost to history if not preserved.
- Libraries should continue and expand public access to the Internet and provide training on how to use information technology.
- Librarians should advocate for a universal basic income, a reduced working day for greater leisure time, and other antipoverty measures. Social reforms like these could vastly improve the conditions necessary for broad public participation.
- This framework can be used by a library to evaluate the use of a particular new technology utilizing socially-generated

information. A number of attempts have been made by libraries to encourage civic engagement by using socially-generated technology. Libraries need to consider the accessibility of these projects. Libraries must think about the value of the labor embedded in the creation of these resources. Libraries must consider the kind of communicative public sphere they hope to create.

Industrial democracy is unlikely to return as a key concept in public debate, but concerns about how to democratize economic production should not be obscured by technological change; they should be at the center of such conversations. As more social scientists and economists speculate about rising inequality and the impact of technology replacing the need for human labor in market-based societies, it is notable that there is so little discussion of, as John Lanchester writes, an “alternative future... (of the) kind of world dreamed of by William Morris, full of humans engaged in meaningful and sanely remunerated labour. Except with added robots.”<sup>107</sup>

Since their creation, libraries have continuously confronted the need to adapt to technological change. To move beyond what Birdsall called the “ideology of information technology” would be to reclaim and reorient the discourse that surrounds library innovation. Public investment and subsidy for public purposes is not antithetical to innovation—in fact, innovation would be impossible without infrastructure investments and, per the insights of Karl Polanyi, a market economy could not exist without the active intervention of the state and society. Libraries can act to fill the spaces that markets leave open in the public sphere, libraries can create meaningful, socially important employment opportunities, and libraries can provide access to a wide range of culture, knowledge, and information. In order to do so, they must guarantee access, acknowledge the role of labor in information production, and insure that a democratic communicative space is available to all.

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107. John Lanchester, “The Robots are Coming,” *London Review of Books* 37, no. 5 (2015), 8.

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