

4A—Library Instruction and Political Agency

Information Literacy as Utopia? A Critical Evaluation of Information Literacy's Emancipatory Potential, Martin Nord (Western University).

Librarianship has always struggled to understand the library's role in a sociology of knowledge—that is, the relationship between human thought and the social context within which it arises. One particular expression of this struggle is evolving understandings of information literacy within Library and Information Science (LIS) research. This paper investigates the assumption that information literacy has emancipatory potential, usually framed as a contribution to citizenship and democracy. With Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) in mind, this investigation examines whether this assumption displays traits of ideology and utopia. It then compares the assumption to the discourse surrounding information literacy. Mannheim developed the idea of the sociology of knowledge to discuss the ways in which motives are contextually determined. A single library may have a number of overlapping constituencies that provide context, including the librarians themselves, library directors, the LIS professional and academic communities, library users, the community that funds the library, and political actors. The assumption is that because these constituencies overlap in the location of the library, their intentions must also overlap. The motives of one group, however, may not be exactly the same as those of another group. The question, then, is one of false unity in the ideology of information literacy. If these groups do, in fact, disagree about the purpose of information literacy, from where does the unity come? Mannheim claims that one ideology might dominate the others, creating a utopian idea that cannot ever be fulfilled. This paper juxtaposes a variety of documents about information literacy gathered from information literacy standards, studies of how users understand information literacy, the LIS literature, library communications with their communities, and politicians' campaign statements. The resulting comparison identifies a dominant motive that contrasts with underrepresented motives. The paper also considers the commonly accepted yet porous boundaries between types of librarianship. The current literature on information literacy skews heavily toward academic librarianship. Yet, the stated goal of emancipation is more often attached to public libraries. This inconsistency may be evidence that even within the profession of librarianship, unity in motives does not exist. Information literacy is an increasingly important aspect of librarianship both in North America and worldwide largely because of the shared assumption of emancipatory potential. By way of example, the Association of College and Research Libraries is in the midst of a prominent effort to develop a new framework for information literacy for higher education. With information literacy attracting such sustained and prominent attention, the implications of a potential flaw in that logic of emancipatory potential must be considered.