

Libraries are part of communities. Academic libraries are integrated into universities and colleges, research communities, and in many ways, society in general. Many librarians would agree that this social context is important, yet struggle to understand how it affects all manifestations of libraries' work. One specific manifestation of this struggle is the evolving way in which LIS research understands information literacy.

There are three ways that information literacy is situated in social context. First, it intermediates between the library and society. Next, information literacy as a kind of knowledge arises as a product of or response to society.¹ Finally, thoughts about information literacy are conditioned by social context. It is this latter situation on which this paper will focus primarily.

The sociology of knowledge recognizes that knowledge is always situated in and has its origin in social context. Thus, in order to examine the concept of information literacy through the lens of the sociology of knowledge, we have to ask about its social context. Though this could be a difficult task, Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), one of the founders of classical sociology and of the sociology of knowledge, explains some of the ways we may approach this problem. He never discusses information literacy, yet LIS researchers may apply his theory in two ways. First, his approach involves describability of concepts. Two aspects of the concept of information literacy lend themselves to this approach: definitions and rhetoric. The two are never far apart, often appearing in the same discourse, which includes information literacy standards, LIS literature, library communications with their communities, and sometimes political statements, among others. There is a relatively recent recognition that researchers should pay sustained attention to one particular emphasis within this discourse, the aspirational and emancipatory statements that form much of the rhetoric around information literacy. This rhetoric indicates that information

¹ Lloyd (2012) describes approaches that “can be used to sensitise researchers towards an understanding of information literacy as a socially enacted practice” (p. 772).

literacy helps to establish what Annemaree Lloyd calls an “active, effective and responsible citizenship” (2010, p. 127). Critiques of this line of thinking have taken various forms, to which we will return.

Mannheim's main focus in the sociology of knowledge is the second way we may approach the problem of social context. He asks us to look at the relationships between individuals and groups and between one group and another group. Knowledge arises within a continuum, with the collective on one side and specific individuals on the other. It never comes from either extreme: neither from “men in general who think, or even isolated individuals who do the thinking” (Mannheim, 1946, p. 3). Instead, knowledge comes from the many configurations of people that exist as groups somewhere between those two poles. Mannheim describes “certain groups who have developed a particular style of thought in an endless series of responses to certain typical situations characterizing their common position” (1946, p. 3). The individual is capable of thinking, but only as a result of life experience. To help illustrate this fact, Mannheim compares knowledge to language. Individuals do not speak their own languages, but the same language as their contemporaries and those who came before them.

Individuals belong to groups and tend to work in accordance with the character and position of those groups. Mannheim says that this work can operate in two directions. Either the group works to maintain its surrounding world, trying to prevent change, or it tries to change the world. Mannheim refers to the first response as ideology and the second as utopia.

Ideology consists of the total mental structure of an asserting subject as it appears in different historical-social groups and their currents of thought (Mannheim, 1946, p. 238). Thus, it is “the ideology of an age or of a concrete historic-social group, e.g. of a class, when we are concerned with the characteristics and composition of the total structure of the mind of this epoch or of this

group” (Mannheim, 1946, pp. 49–50). It involves the concept, form, and conceptual framework of a mode of thought. Total ideology has an interesting relationship to the individual, who “participates only in certain fragments of this thought-system” (Mannheim, 1946, p. 52). The thought-system is not merely the sum of those individual fragments but their systematic integration within the whole of a social group.

Weaknesses start to appear in ideologies when we examine them for unity. Mannheim says that facts can only be explained in terms of meaning, and meaning always refers to another meaning (1946, p. 61). When we start to interpret a period, then, we need to look for the conception of unity that underlies that interpretation. We may observe a sense of unreliability in an ideological opponent's ideas that appears due to the social situation in which that individual finds himself. Mannheim encourages us to look at thought not on the level of assertions themselves, but on a structural or noological level, which might not necessarily be the same for everyone. Therefore, the same object might take on different forms and aspects as it develops.

Even before looking at some examples of information literacy rhetoric, librarians can probably identify its commonly accepted characteristics. For many people, information literacy is considered “common sense” and thus often used uncritically (Pawley, 2003, p. 423). Though this leads to many definitions, it also means that those definitions share commonalities. Christine Pawley identifies three key elements that most definitions have in common: resource-based learning, critical thinking, and life-long learning (2003, p. 423). This apparent unity, by itself, does not qualify information literacy for the category of ideology. In order to ascertain this, we first need to understand the concept of utopia.

Utopia is very closely related to ideology. Mannheim defines utopia as the “state of mind” that “is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs” (1946, p. 173) and

transcends the immediate situation in such a way that it forces reality to change, or as Mannheim says, shatter. While ideology is always integrated into dominant worldviews, utopia contests those worldviews. The stage and degree of reality to which one applies the standard of utopia also helps to distinguish it from ideology. If one is in the group that holds the prevailing ideological view, one will see reality as the “structure of relationship” (Mannheim, 1946, p. 176) or environment to which one belongs. However, if one is in the opposing utopian group, one will strive for a new social order. In the former case, people label things as utopian that “from their point of view” (Mannheim, 1946, p. 177) can't be realized. If we broaden the focus from the individual to the group, we see that dominant groups may label opposing concepts as utopian while non-dominant groups would label opposing concepts as ideological.

Mannheim's definition and use of utopia is unique in the history of utopian concepts. He uses the term in a relative sense, meaning that it is only unrealizable from the point of view of an already existing order. In fact, he describes utopias as “often only premature truths” (1946, p. 183). In this understanding, utopianism is directly related to the process of Becoming or *Sein*. Ideas may only be realized in the future, but through continuous development, they may become norms.

Criticisms of this definition of utopia abound, and perhaps rightfully so. Utopias usually are conceived of as perfect but imagined places or states of things, or perhaps as liminal or middle spaces between the real and imagined. Mannheim is unique in believing that utopias may be realized. If we set aside the debate over terminology, however, and focus on the realizability of ideal situations, the kind of analysis that Mannheim asks for is useful for a concept such as information literacy. It allows us to generally equate utopia and norm and ask whether the current concept is a norm in reality, or, if not, whether it may become a norm at a definite point

in the future. The alternative is that ideal information literacy exists only as a norm that will never be fulfilled, but one that we continue to work toward because it is good and because certain individuals in certain places may still be able to attain it.

The paper already posited the possibility that the general consensus over information literacy may indicate an ideology. Now we have to ask about utopia. From the standpoint of the sociology of knowledge, is there a group that strives to change the world of information literacy? First, we need to identify a viewpoint that critiques the dominant rhetoric. Of course, there are many such critiques of information literacy. Lloyd identifies the following: the fact that information literacy is library-centric; the lack of clear focus resulting both in a lack of advocacy and ad hoc approaches; the discrepancy between the narrow skills actually taught and the more complex features that appear in the rhetoric; and the sense by public librarians in particular that the rhetoric of information literacy is imposed without fully understanding the realities of practice (2010, p. 133). Others add the further critique that standard definitions of information literacy do not take into consideration “the social, political, economic, and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption” (Gregory and Higgins, 2013, p. 4). One specific iteration of this critique is offered by Maura Seale, who says “dominant notions of information literacy reinforce and reproduce neoliberal ideology, which is invested in consolidating wealth and power within the upper class through the dispossession and oppression of non-elites” (2013, p. 40).

Identifying these criticisms helps us to ascertain that the predominant rhetoric surrounding information literacy does in fact form an ideology. This is a conceptual framework that is held by the dominant group but because some oppose it, there is weakness in its unity. Yet, though we can identify many criticisms, it is not immediately clear what unites them. The

neoliberal critique is especially strong, and may unite a particular subgroup. If that group envisions a redefined form of information literacy and believes it can put that into practice in such a way that it escapes the influence of neoliberalism, that would qualify as a utopia under Mannheim's definition.

So far, the paper has discussed the concept of information literacy in general. If we narrow the inquiry further to ask specifically about the assumption that information literacy has emancipatory potential, do the qualities of ideology and utopia still hold true? This is much more difficult to answer, because the very same people who criticize information literacy in the broad sense are not as likely to criticize its aspirational language. Examples of this language may be useful at this point.

UNESCO's 2003 Prague Declaration and 2014 Paris Declaration, and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions' (IFLA) 2005 Alexandria Proclamation each pronounce the link between information literacy and citizenship. For instance, the Prague Declaration says that governments should help create "an information literate citizenry" (2003) to close the digital divide and the Paris Declaration says that global developments "give rise to added opportunities and challenges to all stakeholders and practitioners to ensure citizens media and information literacy to navigate such enhanced flows of communication effectively" (2014, p. 1).

Within the LIS community, a common reference point for information literacy is the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL). The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education state that "By ensuring that individuals have the intellectual abilities of reasoning and critical thinking, and by helping them construct a framework for learning how to learn, colleges and universities provide the foundation for

continued growth throughout their careers, as well as in their roles as informed citizens and members of communities” (2000).

Individual academic libraries often also employ emancipatory rhetoric in their communications. An example comes from the Fall 2014 Boston College Libraries Newsletter, which introduces the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy and says it will “ensure students from Boston College are competent information-literate citizens who can navigate the world of information in their research and service in the world” (Pope).

A final example comes from the political world, where libraries are described in sometimes unpredictable ways. However, when the topic is information literacy, the rhetoric often includes the concepts of citizenship and democracy. In 2009, for National Information Literacy Awareness Month, President Barack Obama made a proclamation, wherein he said “we dedicate ourselves to increasing information literacy awareness so that all citizens understand its vital importance.”

These are only a few examples: quotes without much context. However, these examples are representative of many others. Most are examples of rhetoric that exists at significant levels of importance, at UNESCO, IFLA, ACRL, and the U.S. government. Together, they indicate a noteworthy level of agreement. What may be most interesting about this rhetoric is that terms like citizen or sometimes democracy appear to be important as a goal of information literacy, but rarely is a detailed reason given for the link between the two. Even critiques of information literacy will still point to these emancipatory concepts without full explanation. We may find ourselves wondering what kind of citizen and what kind of democracy is intended? How does information literacy help to create citizens? Questions like these are never answered.

In some respects, this may not be problematic. If there actually is broad and general agreement without critique, it may indicate a unity that points to a fulfilled utopia, something for which Mannheim allows. However, at this point, one final central aspect of the sociology of knowledge becomes important. When Mannheim discusses the affiliation of an individual with the work of a group, the focus on the group does not mean that there cannot be critical self-control, that we are carried wherever the group carries us. In fact, the more we are aware of the ways in which we depend on the group and its orientation to action, the better we can control previously uncontrolled factors, finding a kind of objectivity. Thus, even if emancipatory potential is a utopian reality, all other factors being equal, individual librarians should still ask how they depend on the group mindset to achieve that work on their own. Mannheim says that the analyst only fully uses the sociology of knowledge when he or she doesn't stop at analyzing the opponent's point of view, but also his or her own. If we don't do this, we have what he calls a false consciousness.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to systematically examine even the few examples provided. However, if we did have that opportunity, Mannheim prompts a series of questions that could guide our inquiries. First, we should ask why aspirational rhetoric in information literacy appeared when it did by first ascertaining "when and where the world presented itself in such, and only in such a light to the subject that made the assertion" (Mannheim, 1946, p. 244). The reason that this question works is that thought is related to what a particular social group expects. If a concept seems to be absent, that might mean that certain points of view are also absent along with a "definite drive to come to grips with certain life-problems" (Mannheim, 1946, p. 246). Thus, in thinking about information literacy, we could identify a time where

certain qualities of information in the context of other broader societal qualities led a group to expect something that was missing.

Next we should ask, what is the thought-model of emancipation in information literacy? Mannheim's thought-model is "what is implicitly in the mind of a person when he proceeds to reflect about an object" (1946, p. 247). When a specific question and answer exist, there is a model—whether implicit or explicit—of how the thinking surrounding that question and answer can happen. When Christine Pawley says that information literacy is now considered common sense, this is a reflection of the thought-model. Mannheim suggests tracing the origin and radius of diffusion of each individual thought-model in detail to determine how it fits with the social position of various groups and how they interpret the world.

Finally, we can ask about the level of abstraction of a perspective and the degree to which it resists theoretical, systematic formulation (Mannheim, 1946, p. 248). Mannheim does not believe this happens very often, because it can be uncomfortable to explore the implications of a concept. Set positions tend to impose narrowed foci that resist abstraction. We should also avoid the opposite extreme, however, wherein one overemphasizes abstraction and formulation, which may obscure a concrete situation and its unique character.

Karl Mannheim understands the sociology of knowledge through historical-social situations, helping to describe the combination of space and time that contributes to knowledge. In Mannheim's analysis, this leads to his focus on disciplines and movements at the grand scale. The concept of information literacy may not operate at the same scale as liberalism, for instance. Yet, if we take libraries, or even information society more generally, as our universe of inquiry, information literacy is a significant historical-social concept and thus can be analyzed through the lens of the sociology of knowledge.

What is unique about this approach and useful for library science is the different sense of context that it allows, leading to questions that compliment other critiques leveled within the field. For instance, by resetting the focus from our own individual critiques of information literacy based on other individual critiques of information literacy, we now can ask which groups are interested in this concept and which of these groups try to maintain the status quo and which try to bring about change. We also can ask about the stability of this concept, as well as its relation to reality. Is emancipation through information literacy in the process of becoming a norm, or is it already a norm? Finally, the sociology of knowledge prompts us to ask about the unity of a group concept. Within information literacy, one target for this inquiry is the field of librarianship? Do all librarians hold the same views? It is difficult to tell when academic librarians write so many of the critiques and important standards. What do special, public, or school librarians think? These are all directions for further inquiry.

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