

# Critical Information Literacy

EMILY DRABINSKI and EAMON TEWELL

Long Island University, Brooklyn, USA

Critical information literacy (CIL) is a theory and practice that considers the sociopolitical dimensions of information and production of knowledge, and critiques the ways in which systems of power shape the creation, distribution, and reception of information. CIL acknowledges that libraries are not and cannot be neutral actors, and embraces the potential of libraries as catalysts for social change. Information literacy has been a large part of the academic library discourse internationally since the 1970s, as reflected in various professional standards and models. In 1989, the American Library Association convened a Presidential Committee on Information Literacy in order to develop a profession-wide approach to information literacy as an education domain for academic librarians. The committee's final report facilitated the growth of professional infrastructures that made information literacy central to academic librarian identity through the development of professional round tables, journals, task forces, and conferences. In 2000, this work culminated in a document from the Association of College & Research Libraries: the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. From the perspective of CIL, the *Competency Standards* offered a decontextualized, skills-based approach to finding and evaluating information, and arguments against Standards-based teaching in libraries have formed a significant strand of CIL critique. The term information literacy itself has been observed to be comprised of two inherently contradictory terms connoting both freedom and control, and in this way may encourage a productive tension if engaged with critically by librarians (Pawley, 2003).

In many ways, critical information literacy can be seen as an approach to information literacy informed by critical theory, and oftentimes critical pedagogy. CIL ultimately seeks to identify and take action upon forms of oppression, and proposes to undertake this work by engaging with local communities. In addition, praxis is a concept central to critical information literacy in that it encourages the reciprocity between theory, reflection, and practice (Jacobs, 2008). Though not limited to teaching, critical information literacy is rooted in information literacy instruction and the educational efforts of librarians. CIL urges students to recognize and resist dominant modes of information production, dissemination, and use. Foundations of the critical information literacy literature include Elmborg's 2006 article on critical information literacy instruction and the edited volume *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (Accardi, Drabinski, & Kumbier, 2010).

While these works and others find inspiration in Paulo Freire and the field of critical pedagogy, other researchers have emphasized the usefulness of critical theory as well as

*The International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy*. Renee Hobbs and Paul Mihailidis (Editors-in-Chief),

Gianna Cappello, Maria Ranieri, and Benjamin Thevenin (Associate Editors).

© 2019 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2019 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118978238.ieml0042

composition studies. Librarians incorporate queer, hip-hop, feminist, and critical race pedagogies into their instructional practice and document this work in conferences, books, and professional journals. CIL also engages the field of composition studies as librarians articulate information literacy through rhetorical frameworks. The field of CIL has grown significantly since 2000. Two notable works that expand upon and complement prior research include Higgins and Gregory's *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* (2013) and Downey's *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspirations, and Ideas* (2016). Tewell's (2015) literature review contains an introduction to the scholarship of CIL.

Critical information literacy overlaps considerably with critical media literacy, particularly concerning the teaching of knowledge structures and considerations of power and agency in both education and media creation and consumption. CIL tends to be more specific in its challenges to dominant information systems in that it frequently locates its critiques within and in relation to libraries and librarianship. Some proponents of CIL argue for expanding the literacies addressed in the library classroom to include visual literacies, media literacies, and metaliteracies, suggesting that the narrow focus on information constrains the critical potential of librarians. Still, information remains the focus for CIL practitioners. CIL and critical media literacy share many concerns, and additional research on the intersections between these fields could be of significant use to educators.

The theory and practice of critical information literacy continues to flourish, with the pace of scholarly interest showing no sign of slowing. Much of the early work in CIL centered on critiques of the Competency Standards adopted by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) in 2000. In 2016, the profession replaced the Competency Standards with the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, a document that incorporates some ideas of the CIL literature. The *Framework* emphasizes concepts rather than competencies, and argues for contextual and self-reflective information literacy education that centers the needs of particular learners in particular situations. Since its adoption, the *Framework* has been the site of significant professional engagement, some of which expands the theory and practice of CIL.

As a document intended to shape both teaching practices in academic libraries and cross-disciplinary conversations about information and learning, the *Framework* is constituted primarily of six frames (ACRL, 2016). "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual," for instance, asks teachers and learners to consider context in assessing authority, as opposed to accepting more reductive indicators of authority such as an author's credentials or an article having undergone peer review (Drabinski, 2016). "Information Has Value" is a good example of the ways in which the *Framework* is both more open toward critical teaching and does not go far enough in its critique of information's production: the Knowledge Practices and Dispositions described include the examination of one's information privilege and recognizing the commodification of personal information, yet admit no contradiction when referring to the "information marketplace." Some have critiqued the *Framework* for not directly connecting social justice with information literacy, and have pointed to a need to move beyond the *Framework* for critical librarians (Battista et al., 2015). Ultimately, it is up to librarians

to develop educational opportunities appropriate to their local contexts: a reality the *Framework* document acknowledges and encourages.

Current interest in CIL ranges from the theoretical to the practical, with the two-volume *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* (Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016), an article by Tewell (2017), and the recently established *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* being good examples of current directions and interests. Recent literature has engaged a number of theoretical orientations that range from classical Greek theories of time (Drabinski, 2014) to cyberfeminism (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2014). CIL is increasingly expansive in its consideration of useful theories and shared interests with other fields, particularly as it has matured.

With the intensifying corporatization of higher education across the world, CIL must continue to resist the encroachment of neoliberalism into new territories both digital and physical, as well as act to counter political regimes that attempt to stifle freedom of speech and sow confusion among citizens. CIL is fundamentally concerned with how some forms of knowledge and not others are produced as true. Making knowledge is a political project, one that critical library educators seek to surface and make evident to all kinds of learners. It is crucial that librarians and other educators not attempt to avoid politics, but instead engage directly with the major issues of violence towards women, people of color, queer people, and other marginalized populations, and with the systems of power that sanction and endorse these acts of violence. Connecting that violence to forms of knowledge production, dissemination, and use will continue to be a focus for CIL practitioners and theorists. Critical information literacy is one way that librarians can work with others to identify and resist forms of oppression, and it is imperative that this work continues.

SEE ALSO: Critical Pedagogy; Knowledge Structures

## References

---

- Accardi, M.T., Drabinski, E., & Kumbier, A. (Eds.). (2010). *Critical library instruction: Theories and methods*. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press.
- Association of College & Research Libraries. (2016). *Framework for information literacy for higher education*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>
- Battista, A., Ellenwood, D., Gregory, L., Higgins, S., Lilburn, J., Harker, Y.S., & Sweet, C. (2015). Seeking social justice in the ACRL framework. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 9(2), 111–125. Retrieved from <http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=v9i2p111>
- Downey, A. (2016). *Critical information literacy: Foundations, inspirations, and ideas*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press.
- Drabinski, E. (2014). Toward a Kairos of library instruction. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 40(5), 480–485. doi: 10.1016/j.acalib.2014.06.002
- Drabinski, E. (2016). Turning inward: Reading the Framework through the six frames. *College & Research Libraries News*, 77(8), 382–384. doi: 10.5860/crln.77.8.9537
- Elmborg, J. (2006). Critical information literacy: Implications for instructional practice. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 32(2), 192–199. doi: 10.1016/j.acalib.2005.12.004
- Higgins, S., & Gregory, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Information literacy and social justice: Radical professional praxis*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press.

- Jacobs, H.L. (2008). Information literacy and reflective pedagogical praxis. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 34(3), 256–262. doi: 10.1016/j.acalib.2008.03.009
- Pagowsky, N., & McElroy, K. (Eds.). (2016). *Critical library pedagogy handbook*. Chicago, IL: Association of College & Research Libraries.
- Pawley, C. (2003). Information literacy: A contradictory coupling. *The Library Quarterly*, 73(4), 422–452. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4309685>
- Schlesselman-Tarango, G. (2014). Cyborgs in the academic library: A cyberfeminist approach to information literacy instruction. *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian*, 33(1), 29–46. doi: 10.1080/01639269.2014.872529
- Tewell, E. (2015). A decade of critical information literacy: A review of the literature. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 9(1), 24–43. doi: 10.15760/comminfolit.2015.9.1.174
- Tewell, E. (2017). The practice and promise of critical information literacy: Academic librarians' involvement in critical library instruction. *College & Research Libraries*, 79(1), 10–34. doi: 10.5860/crl.79.1.10

### Further reading

---

- Bauder, J., & Rod, C. (2016). Crossing thresholds: Critical information literacy pedagogy and the ACRL Framework. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 23(3), 252–264. doi: 10.1080/10691316.2015.1025323
- Beilin, I. (2016). Student success and the neoliberal academic library. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 1(1), 10–23. Retrieved from <http://www.cjal.ca/index.php/capal/article/view/24303>
- Nicholson, K.P. (2015). The McDonaldization of academic libraries and the values of transformational change. *College & Research Libraries*, 76(3), 328–338. doi: 10.5860/crl.76.3.328
- Schroeder, R. (2014). *Critical journeys: How 14 librarians came to embrace critical practice*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press.
- Seale, M. (2016). Enlightenment, neoliberalism, and information literacy. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 1(1), 80–91. Retrieved from <http://www.cjal.ca/index.php/capal/article/view/24308>

**Emily Drabinski** is Associate Professor and Coordinator of Library Instruction at Long Island University, Brooklyn. Emily is the recipient of the Ilene F. Rockman Instruction Publication of the Year Award for her 2015 article, “Toward a Kairos of Library Instruction.” She is coeditor of *Critical Library Instruction: Theories & Methods* (2010).

**Eamon Tewell** is Assistant Professor and Reference & Instruction Librarian at Long Island University, Brooklyn. Eamon is the recipient of the 2016 Jesse H. Shera Award for Distinguished Published Research, awarded by the American Library Association's Library Research Round Table. His research interests are in critical information literacy, popular media in library instruction, and televisual representations of libraries.