Understanding Critical Information Literacy through Social Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

Critical theoretical approaches to information literacy are an important part of the growing LIS focus on the context of information. This concern for information's social environment and the awareness of new models of interaction between learners and librarians open the possibility for using social epistemology to better understand information literacy.

The concept of social epistemology—the study of the ways in which an individual's knowledge is shaped by their interactions with the world around them—has long been part of epistemology. However, LIS theorists Margaret Egan and Jesse Shera, who coined the term, intended it to address librarianship specifically. This paper argues that social epistemology is well positioned to strengthen the critical practice of information literacy, based on both the social epistemological characteristics of critical theory and the information literacy aspects of the social epistemology stream in the field of philosophy.

A review of the critical theoretical trend in LIS literature on information literacy reveals an already-present social epistemological foundation on which LIS research can build to expand the application of critical theory to information literacy. Placing this literature in conversation with itself illuminates the ways in which engagement with social epistemological concerns is already evolving. This paper then critiques the literature and highlights some concerns. Recognition of these weaknesses in otherwise valuable work alerts us to opportunities for improvement. This paper suggests that future progress will be tied to a better understanding of the social context of knowledge.

Keywords: critical information literacy · social epistemology

RÉSUMÉ

Les approches théoriques critiques de la maîtrise de l'information constituent un élément clé de l'importance croissante accordée par la BSI au contexte de l'information. Ce souci de l'environnement social de l'information et la prise de conscience des nouveaux modèles d'interaction entre apprenants et bibliothécaires ouvrent la possibilité d'utiliser l'épistémologie sociale pour mieux comprendre la maîtrise de l'information.

Le concept d'épistémologie sociale — l'étude de la façon dont les connaissances d'un individu sont façonnées par ses interactions avec le monde qui l'entoure — fait depuis longtemps partie de l'épistémologie. Cependant, les théoriciens de la BSI, Margaret Egan et Jesse Shera, qui ont inventé le terme, l'ont utilisé pour parler de la bibliothéconomie en particulier. Cet article soutient que l'épistémologie sociale est bien placée pour renforcer la pratique critique de la maîtrise de l'information, fondée à la fois sur les caractéristiques épistémologiques sociales de la théorie critique et sur les aspects de maîtrise de l'information du courant de l'épistémologie sociale dans le domaine de la philosophie.

Un examen de la tendance théorique critique de la littérature de la BSI sur la maîtrise de l'information révèle un fondement épistémologique social déjà présent sur lequel la recherche en sciences de l'information peut s'appuyer pour étendre l'application de la théorie critique à la maîtrise de l'information. Lorsque cette littérature entre en conversation avec elle-même, elle met en lumière les façons dont l'engagement à l'égard des préoccupations épistémologiques sociales est déjà en train d'évoluer. Ensuite, l'article analyse la documentation et souligne certaines préoccupations. La reconnaissance de ces faiblesses dans des travaux par ailleurs précieux nous alerte sur les possibilités d'amélioration. Cette communication suggère que les progrès futurs seront liés à une meilleure compréhension du contexte social du savoir.

Mots-clés : *épistémologie sociale · maîtrise critique de l'information*

LIS literature on information literacy has increasingly focused on the economic, political, and social context of information. As part of this trend, critical theoretical approaches to information literacy are growing in visibility, a situation perhaps best illustrated by the inclusion of critical considerations in ACRL's (2015) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. The literature's concern for information's social context and the awareness of new models of interaction between learners and librarians opens the possibility for using social epistemology—a relatively new approach to epistemology that recognizes that knowledge is shaped by individuals' interactions with the world around them—to better understand information literacy in libraries.

The relationship between information literacy and social epistemology may be considered in three ways. First, critical information literacy is already doing social epistemology by drawing on theorists who employ social epistemology without naming it as such. Second, critical information literacy is doing work parallel to social epistemology, investigating many of the same situations. Finally, some critiques of the critical information literacy literature may be addressed by intentional use of social epistemology. These three themes emerge from an analysis of the information literacy literature and are developed by placing the literature in conversation with itself and, in the process, exploring how the relationship between information literacy and social epistemology continues to unfold even without great awareness of

that relationship. These themes depend on an awareness of the overlapping concerns of critical information literacy, the critical theory on which critical information literacy draws, and social epistemology, a distinct field that also asks questions about knowledge in the world.

Introduction to Social Epistemology and its Relationship to Information Literacy

For Alvin Goldman, the most prominent philosopher in the field, social epistemology is “the evaluation, from an epistemic perspective, of various ‘decisions’ or ‘choices’ by epistemic agents, or, in the case of the systems approach, the evaluation of alternative social systems from an epistemic standpoint” (2011, 11). An understanding of what Goldman means is necessary to fully appreciate the relationship between critical information literacy and social epistemology. Therefore, this dense definition requires some unpacking. Deconstructing the definition also provides the opportunity to make some initial comparisons with the ACRL *Framework*, which is indicative of current information literacy theory and practice.

The evaluation of the epistemic perspective has always fallen under the purview of epistemology. This has not changed under social epistemology. In other words, the field still investigates epistemology’s core concern: the beliefs that individuals think they are justified in holding. Social epistemology expands the parameters of this concern to include other considerations. Goldman’s definition encompasses four components that he introduces to systematize social epistemology: the mental choices involved in shaping knowledge, the sources of evidence for those choices, the evaluation of outcomes of those choices, and the types of actors involved in the choices.

The first component of Goldman’s definition is the mental choices involved in shaping knowledge. These choices manifest in a variety of ways. The most straightforward of these are belief, rejection, or the withholding of judgment concerning a proposition. Nuances, such as gradations of belief, expand the range of inquiry. However, kinds of choices extend even beyond these ways to include “(1) choices of whether or what to *assert*, (2) choices of whether or how to *search* for evidence, and (3) choices among alternative *institutions*, *arrangements*, or *characteristics* of social systems that influence epistemic outcomes” (2011, 12, Goldman’s italics). Social epistemology consequently multiplies the avenues of inquiry open to epistemological investigations of choice. In discussing epistemic choices, Goldman makes it clear that such choices are not always intentional and, in particular, “belief and rejection are not, for the most part, voluntary affairs” (12). The *Framework* does not explicitly use the language of epistemic choice. Yet, it hints at such choice. The “Information Creation

as Process” frame says that learners make “choices when matching information products with their information needs,” (ACRL 2015, 5), which directly relates to Goldman’s point (2) above. Similarly, the “Information Has Value” frame describes individual responsibility for “deliberate and informed choices about when to comply with and when to contest current legal and socioeconomic practices concerning the value of information” (6). The relationship is not as direct as the previous one, but this language can be compared to Goldman’s point (3) above.

The second component addresses how epistemic choices are made based on different kinds of sources. In traditional epistemology, these sources usually refer to “perception, memory, reasoning, and introspection” (Goldman 2011, 13)—abstracted and individual processes that do not require input from outside the self. Social epistemology shows greater interest in evidence as a source. Evidence is still largely concerned with actual perception or the appearance of perception, but this now primarily takes the form of investigations of testimony, which is the social form of evidence. In other words, testimony refers to the process of acquiring knowledge from a source outside the self, as opposed to relying only on the traditional epistemological sources. The *Framework* does not explicitly concern itself with testimony. However, the debates about the nature of testimony within the field of social epistemology touch on concepts that the *Framework* also addresses. Evidence is the most obvious of these concepts, seen especially through the use of language like “perspectives” and “contributing work of others,” along with “evidence” itself, to help librarians and learners think through the evolving nature of scholarship in the “Scholarship as Conversation” frame (ACRL 2015, 8). Not surprisingly, the *Framework’s* language also emphasizes thinking about sources of information in general, as this is where libraries, in a traditional sense, enter most explicitly into the conversation. A less obvious conceptual relationship is highlighted by the *Framework’s* engagement with the idea of authority. In the field of social epistemology, scholars often raise questions about the role and nature of authority in the process of knowledge acquisition. The *Framework’s* “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” frame is not written to engage in such a debate, yet its authors do take a clear stand on the questions asked by social epistemology, specifically those concerning justification, expertise, and peer disagreement. The idea that authority is constructed, contextual, and should be viewed “with an attitude of informed skepticism and an openness to new perspectives” (4) is an interpretation of epistemological authority that alerts the *Framework’s* readers to the social constraints on evidence.

Goldman’s third component says that social epistemology evaluates epistemic choices for certain kinds of outcomes. Evaluation proceeds based on fundamental epistemic values that include “(1) having true beliefs, (2) avoiding errors, (3) having

justified beliefs, (4) having rational beliefs (or partial beliefs), and (5) having knowledge” (2011, 14). Evaluation may extend beyond these values to consider consequences or articulation of norms. Language concerning evaluation is prominent throughout the *Framework*. However, that evaluation refers especially to assessments of sources rather than to examination of impacts on individuals. The *Framework* does include a significant exception, though, under the “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” frame, which describes learners as “conscious that maintaining . . . attitudes and actions requires frequent self-evaluation” (ACRL 2015, 4). Here, the *Framework* addresses an epistemic outcome of information literacy.

The fourth and final component directs our attention to the types of actors involved in epistemic choices. These actors include epistemic agents who may be individuals or collective agents—collective entities such as governments or corporations that are made of up individual epistemic agents. As Goldman notes in his definition, epistemic systems also affect choices. An epistemic system is a “social system that houses social practices, procedures, institutions, and/or patterns of interpersonal influence that affect the epistemic outcomes of its members” (2011, 18). Epistemic systems ostensibly aim to promote their community’s possession of truth, information, knowledge, and justified or rational belief (19). One of social epistemology’s jobs is to examine systems to determine whether they actually promote these ends.

The *Framework* addresses the epistemic agent within several frames, especially when the agent is considered in terms of Goldman’s epistemic systems. The “Information Has Value” frame highlights legal and socioeconomic interests (ACRL 2015, 6). The “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” frame adds some evidence in the form of recognizing, first, that authorities have biases that learners should examine and, secondly, that “systems . . . elevated that authority” (4). In writing this, the *Framework*’s authors broach the idea that systemic and cognitive authority are related to each other, a larger discussion to which this article will return. Likewise, the “Scholarship as Conversation” frame considers the influence of “established power and authority structures” (8). Together, these frames demonstrate the overlap in thinking carefully about both information literacy and epistemic agents.

It is worth noting that, though Goldman’s definition is decidedly contemporary, the concerns of social epistemology surface in epistemological investigations throughout history, reaching back at least to Plato. Earlier philosophers and theorists addressed what are now some of social epistemology’s key topics. These include expertise; testimony; and peer, group, and system influence over agreement, disagreement, and belief.

In Plato's *Charmides*, Socrates explores the ways in which an ordinary individual can investigate other people's claims to expertise. Through a dialogue with Charmides, Socrates reveals how difficult it is "to distinguish a doctor who knows the business of his art from one who does not know but pretends or thinks he does" (1955, 171c), or indeed to distinguish any expert from a pretender, unless one is also an expert in that area of knowledge.

John Locke and David Hume, both eighteenth-century British philosophers, were interested in the issue of testimony. Both philosophers are usually interpreted as believing that knowledge derived from testimony must be limited. Accordingly, Locke said, "the floating of other men's opinions in our brains, makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true" (1975, I.iv.23). Locke believed that knowledge is always connected to perception and that testimony is not a form of perception. All that is allowed, then, is to consider the probability that one's experiences compare well to the experiences presented in another's testimony. Hume (1999) took a relatively similar position, arguing that testimony is only worthwhile to the extent that an individual can verify the testimony through personal observation, memory, and induction. In other words, people should not simply believe a well-articulated proposition; they must also have a good reason for believing that proposition based on personal experience.

Starting with Marx and continuing with the Frankfurt School, critical theory, broadly construed, often investigated ideology, criteria of truth, and critique of power in relation to knowledge. Remembering Goldman's definition of epistemic systems, these critical investigations have much to say about systems' influence over belief. A brief summary of the ways in which critical theory corresponds to social epistemology follows later in the article. For now, just one example demonstrates the social epistemological flavour of some critical theory analyses: Anthony Giddens, in thinking about the relationship between social beliefs and action, writes that "criticism of false belief (*ceteris paribus*) is a practical intervention in society, a political phenomenon in a broad sense of that term" (1984, 340). For Giddens, as for many critical theorists, epistemic claims are firmly related to social systems. To deal with one is to deal with the other.

More recently, social epistemology has become a recognized subfield of philosophy.¹ This status provides the impetus for more formal inquiries into questions like those just summarized. Those questions that were once isolated are now increasingly brought into conversation as part of the overall inquiry into the nature of humanity's epistemic situation.

1. Oxford University Press published *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings* in 2011 and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has included an entry on "Social Epistemology" since 2001.

LIS also played an important role in the history of social epistemology. The field's contribution is now known almost exclusively through the term itself, which was coined by LIS theorists Margaret Egan and Jesse Shera in 1952 (132). As John Budd notes, Shera believed that in social epistemology he had articulated "the genuine purpose of librarianship" (Budd 2001, 222). As Shera defined it, social epistemology "should provide a framework for the investigation of the entire complex problem of the nature of the intellectual process in society—a study of the ways in which society as a whole achieves a perceptive and understanding relationship to its environment" (1973, 96). Shera's vision of librarianship clearly sees librarians as occupying a position of knowledge facilitation between humans as thinking creatures and their environment. This definition of librarianship is not confined within the library, but recognizes the role of the library's social impact. According to Shera, though librarians focus primarily on serving the individual, "the ultimate objective is the betterment of society; therefore the librarian must not only know the cognitive system of the individual, but also the communication network of society" (95). This contrasts with what Shera sees as the library's traditional focus on helping people as isolated, decontextualized individuals (95).

Social epistemology never achieved the foundational prominence that Shera envisioned within LIS. However, that has not stopped the concept from becoming a focus of philosophy, critical theory, and the sociology of science. Thinkers in these fields developed their understandings and uses of social epistemology independently of Shera and LIS by drawing on their shared philosophical heritage, described earlier. Yet, there are acknowledgements of an LIS contribution, and of Egan and Shera's contribution specifically, most significantly a 2002 special issue of the journal *Social Epistemology* on "Social Epistemology and Information Science." This is perhaps the most obvious clue that librarians need to think about the relationship between these fields.

The relationship between social epistemology and information literacy can be articulated in a different way through a more general look at Goldman's definition of social epistemology. According to that description, formal social epistemology works to correct the traditional decontextualization of epistemology which focuses on individual beliefs and disbeliefs, rather than recognizing that human knowing is shaped both by the relationships we have with other people and by social institutions. Analyses concerning information literacy have never had to deal with this problem of decontextualization because information literacy always involved the search for something that one does not have. In other words, it always has reached beyond the self. Individuals need to make choices as they discover, understand, and use information, even as they are often constrained in that process. Here, the language of social epistemology can easily stand in to describe these individuals as agents

exercising their epistemic agency within or against systems, which in Goldman's definition would include the likes of networks or cultures. One key difference between social epistemology and information literacy is that LIS scholars and practitioners are only beginning to consistently think about the full reach of social context in terms of inputs—other peoples' or institutions' evidence in the form of assertions, opinions, arguments, and findings—that affect epistemic decisions to believe one thing over another.

Another way to consider the relationship between social epistemology and information literacy is the hypothetical situation of a student writing a paper. To understand the topic, the student draws on personal knowledge of the topic, probably recalling class discussions. This student may ask friends or family what they know about the topic, look at a Wikipedia article, and locate some written sources, perhaps after asking for some assistance from a librarian. At each step, the student makes decisions about how to locate information as well as decisions about which information to retain for synthesis in the paper. This hypothetical situation presents a picture of both phenomena—social epistemology and information literacy—at work. The student does not do the research in isolation: each step occurs as interaction with specific instances of social context, including the classroom (and its associated contexts such as discipline or institution), friends or family, Wikipedia as a social institution, and the library and librarian. This is social epistemology. At the same time, the student considers the nature of each of these sources and the information they provide and makes decisions based on that understanding to create new knowledge. This is information literacy.

Bringing in Social Epistemology through Critical Theory

The literature on critical information literacy already participates in social epistemological work because it sometimes employs the work of critical theorists who ask questions of a social epistemological nature. This literature, in general, relies more heavily on previous LIS thought than on individual critical theorists, as it should. However, this means that direct and sustained engagement with critical theorists is unusual, and that the contributions of these theorists is most likely to appear indirectly, such as through citation of other LIS literature that provides that precise engagement. Nevertheless, a few representative examples of the direct integration of critical theorists' thoughts demonstrate how inclusion of critical theory may hint at the simultaneous, though subtle, inclusion of social epistemology.

Critical information literacy scholars primarily rely on Paulo Freire, while other critical theoretical sources—such as Habermas and Foucault, each of whom is also discussed below—appear in isolated scholarship. Freire, Habermas, and

Foucault each study knowledge as something intertwined with social structure, an object of study that sits squarely within the parameters of social epistemology. Social epistemologists would study the same or similar phenomena with the goal of describing and appraising the objects' ability to discover the "truth." Freire, Habermas, and Foucault, however, share the pursuit of something beyond description and appraisal: change—even as they have different goals in their theoretical projects. This is what defines them as critical theorists and not social epistemologists, even as they study similar phenomena. By way of example, Habermas—who, incidentally, is often cited in social epistemology literature—built his theory of communicative action in answer to a question about "rational behaviour" and its relationship to "how speaking and acting subjects *acquire and use knowledge*" (1984, 8, Habermas's italics). Beyond the social characteristics of acquiring and using knowledge, Habermas goes on to inquire about such social epistemological concerns as the reliability of knowledge. In engaging in this project, Habermas's goal does not end with an evaluation of this epistemic situation, which would be the purview of social epistemology. Instead, he contests modernization's simplified understanding of rationalization and works towards a new understanding. This movement toward change reflects his purposes as a critical theorist. A critical information literacy scholar who employed Habermas's theory of communicative action could thus bring social epistemological questions into the project without naming it as such.

Much of the LIS literature that examines information literacy from a critical theory perspective draws on Paulo Freire's work on liberation pedagogy. Freire's work clearly is a kind of social epistemology. As he writes, "the we think determines the I think" (1976, 213). In Freire's work, education traditionally suffers under the "banking model," where "the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (2000, 73). In other words, education traditionally approaches students as vessels empty of knowledge, waiting to be filled by the teacher. Freire offers instead a dialogic solution wherein students teach teachers even as the teachers teach the students. For instance, in his *culture circles*, Freire brings students and an educator together to discuss and articulate themes that are significant within the students' lives. The result of such pedagogy is what Freire called *conscientization*, a form of critical thinking in which students are able to see the world as something that may be transformed.

A small but robust LIS literature applies these Freirean theories to information literacy, as evident in just three examples. Troy Swanson argues that information literacy should draw on Freirean approaches to instruction through a series of recognitions: that education is not apolitical; that technology is not value-free, so information also is not apolitical; and that there is a call for praxis in both thought

and action (2005, 71-72, 74). In other words, Swanson argues that librarians should recognize that the biases they hold—especially those that Swanson highlights as political—impact their interactions with students and must be disclosed as part of Freire’s dialogic method. Technology and information are likewise biased, and students should be taught to approach them as such. As students learn to encounter the world of information in this way, librarians should ask them to not just “know,” but to act to improve what they encounter. This is an especially Freirian kind of thought that reflects his conscientization.

Conscientization may seem more radical than what many librarians would expect to find in the *Framework*. Yet, the *Framework* includes numerous hints that the authors would like for learners to learn something about themselves and their world in such a way that it could constitute a first step toward conscientization. These hints appear most often in various frames’ dispositions, most notably in the “Authority is Constructed and Contextual,” “Information Has Value,” and “Research As Inquiry” frames. This perhaps is not surprising, because the purpose of the dispositions is to “describe ways in which to address the affective, attitudinal, or valuing dimension of learning” (ACRL 2015, 2). In other words, each frame includes a section focused on ways to address how learners realize new approaches in lived experience. Thus, when the “Research as Inquiry” frame’s dispositions include ideas like “maintain an open mind and a critical stance” and “seek multiple perspectives during information gathering and assessment” (7), this description of information literacy by itself does not lead to a new world. It does, however, recommend that learners take some of the initial steps on that path by suggesting that they not accept the world the way it is presented to them by certain authorities.

Amy Mark’s analysis of information literacy extends across two articles. In the first, she investigates how undergraduate students learn information literacy and finds that librarians teach students peer review as an ideal of academic culture rather than for pedagogical reasons. Mark argues that academia is set up such that student voices are devalued because “the culture, politics, and economics of peer review systems position faculty as experts, creating a gulf between students as creators of thought and faculty as the arbitrators, or depositors, of what is useful knowledge” (2011a, 5). Librarians are asked to work against this system of banking education by valuing students’ own experiences with information, even if those experiences are not valued by academia. In her second article, Mark finds that formats that represent student perspectives are not perceived to be as credible as formats produced by the scholarly communication system. In other words, what students hear from faculty is that format is a substitute for credibility. Mark says that she arrives at this conclusion because she listened to students’ voices, a process she sees as working against the

act—which Freire called banking information—of depositing information in students without considering the power relationship involved. Mark believes that information literacy must involve students as “co-creators and co-interpreters of information literacy standards” (2011b, 25) if this tendency in pedagogy is to be overcome.

In both articles, Mark cites Freire to argue that student interests and perspectives are not recognized in the education models usually provided by librarians. Mark wrote her articles before the development of the *Framework*. Yet, her use of Freirian concepts in this argument anticipates the *Framework*’s description of learners’ active participation in the processes that encompass scholarship. This acknowledgement is integrated throughout the *Framework*’s introduction, which states that “students have a greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge, in understanding the contours and the changing dynamics of the world of information, and in using information, data, and scholarship ethically” (ACRL 2015, 2), as well as in many of the frames. In the “Information Has Value” frame, one of the dispositions addresses this concern most directly by suggesting that learners should “see themselves as contributors to the information marketplace rather than only consumers of it” (6). The importance of this idea may be indicated by the fact that the idea is repeated almost verbatim in the “Scholarship as Conversation” frame’s dispositions.

Though the focus in LIS literature on critical theoretical approaches to information literacy overwhelmingly focuses on Freire, there are exceptions. Two such examples also emphasize social epistemological concerns. Jack Andersen explores information literacy through its connections with composition studies and Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the public sphere. Andersen argues that through these connections, we can analyze “how society is organized as an information sphere” (2006, 216). As interpreted by Andersen, Habermas’s description of the organization of society into private, public, and public authority spheres is also a description of the organization of society’s communication structures and the information systems that developed as part of that organization. According to Andersen, as people search for information, they engage in a sociopolitical activity because “to search for information is to search in various spheres” that are “discursively constituted” (222). Information literacy involves the ability of individuals to consider who has produced information, how it has been produced, and for what purposes.

Sharon Comstock briefly cites Michel Foucault to explain how both students and librarians in school libraries are limited by the dominant information literacy discourses. Such discourses “define and control knowledges, relationship, and institutions and become evident in a culture only when we examine the thematic ‘texts’ . . . of a society” (Comstock 2012, 45). In other words, Foucault’s insights can prompt librarians to ask not only what information literacy is, but also why it is that

way. Comstock concludes that both groups might benefit from better critiques of their own lived information behaviors (ii). Her dissertation is thus another example of how the inclusion of critical theoretical thought, though limited in this case, subtly brings social epistemological concerns into her study. At the same time, Comstock's invocation of Foucault and his concerns about dominant discourses reflects the significance of this topic for the field of critical information literacy, something that is very evident in the *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*. At points, when authors in the *Handbook* employ the thoughts of critical theorists to discuss the power and effect of various discourses that influence information literacy, they also bring in questions of a social epistemological nature. However, these examples are few, indicating that this remains an area ripe for exploration.

Critical information literacy draws heavily on critical theorists. Max Horkheimer defined the goal of critical theory as “man’s emancipation from slavery” (2002, 246). In other words, it is a transformative goal. When Andrew Whitworth—who relies on critical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas concerning dialogue, and through this indirectly makes social epistemology claims—summarizes his radical information literacy project as exploring “ways to *more widely distribute authority over information practices*” (2014, 1, Whitworth’s italics), it reflects critical theorists’ desire to decrease domination in every form. In both cases, the way to achieve this transformation is through explanation of the world. It is in the work of describing and understanding the world that the work of critical theorists aligns with social epistemology, even as social epistemology does not aim to change the world. The relationship between social epistemology and critical theory is informal, the scholars in the fields perhaps best described as sometimes asking the same kinds of questions. Critical theorists often focus their attention on discourses or institutions that display power asymmetries of information or knowledge. In these cases, critical theorists study the role of choices in shaping knowledge in ways that encompass Goldman’s four considerations. They employ terminology that reflects different emphases—for example, framing choices in terms of agency—but the two fields demonstrate considerable similarities in their investigations of the relationship between individuals and knowledge in the world. Because the thinkers of critical information literacy, critical theory, and social epistemology share this concern, even as they have different goals, it is not surprising to find social epistemology present in the critical information literacy literature, under the radar, so to speak. Swanson, Mark, Andersen, and Comstock all demonstrate this phenomenon as they draw on the thoughts of critical theorists. The discovery of critical information literacy doing work that explicitly parallels formal social epistemology might then seem surprising. Yet, this literature also exists.

Critical Information Literacy Paralleling Social Epistemology

A good example that bridges the two literatures is Wikipedia, an information literacy concern for Heidi Jacobs and a social epistemological concern for Don Fallis. Jacobs, who is an information literacy librarian, writes that she is “struck by how often I hear ‘problem’ and ‘Wikipedia’ in the same sentence” (2010, 179). She investigates the juxtaposition of these two words, setting up “Wikipedia as a difficult information literacy question [that] allows us to consider how knowledge is created, produced, and disseminated, and to interrogate our current understanding of scholarship, scholarly authority, and the academy” (179). This list of issues mirrors social epistemology’s consideration of the design of knowledge systems and its concerns with trust in testimony and experts.

Compare this to Fallis’s interest in Wikipedia. Fallis considers the fact that Wikipedia contributors want to build a good encyclopedia, and that “this goal is clearly *epistemic*,” because “a good encyclopedia is a place where people can ‘acquire knowledge’ and sometimes ‘share knowledge’” (2011, 298, Fallis’s italics). He then draws on Goldman to provide support for his argument that “the primary task for the social epistemologist is to evaluate social institutions, such as Wikipedia, in terms of their epistemic consequences” (298).

Both Jacobs and Fallis are drawn to an investigation of Wikipedia because of Jacobs’s “problem.” Fallis calls this problem Wikipedia’s epistemic concerns, which consist of concerns about reliability and verifiability, and then dismisses them based on empirical evidence. Jacobs follows the same pattern, naming similar concerns but dismissing them through an application of Freirean critique. Jacobs’s and Fallis’s writings on Wikipedia parallel each other.

Critiques of the Critical Information Literacy Literature

The examples discussed above indicate the individual and collective strengths of those participating in the field of critical information literacy; they are rightly concerned about social context, critical theoretical approaches, and new models. Yet, the literature displays at least two shortcomings and one danger. At the root of the first problem is the focus on the theory of banking education within Freirean pedagogy. The second problem is that information literacy has traditionally been understood as an isolated activity that occurs especially in academic libraries and primarily in one-shot sessions. The good work of critical information literacy gives rise to the danger: the potential for librarians to diminish authority and agency in problematic ways. This article will address these three concerns in turn.

While the Swanson and Mark integrate Freire's theories into their discussions of information literacy, their focus on the critique of banking education does not acknowledge other uses for Freire's thoughts, including those with social epistemological connotations. Many aspects of Freire's model, such as culture circles, conscientization, and *reading the word* and *reading the world* as a form of praxis, might have useful application. The existing LIS literature and, indirectly, the *Framework* correctly recognize a role for Freire's theories, but a fuller engagement would help to develop a much richer conception of information literacy. This engagement has already begun. For example, when the introduction to the *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* presents concepts that readers will encounter throughout the book, it refers especially to Freire's banking concept of education and conscientization (Pagowsky and McElroy 2016, 1:xviii-xix). Conscientization, under which dialogue is also addressed, receives as much attention as does banking education. About one third of the chapters use Freire's theories in some way and their authors continue the introduction's approach. Though they still emphasize the banking concept of education, they also employ other concepts of Freire's. Conscientization and dialogue are noticeably evident, but even more obscure concepts are present. For example, Espinel draws on Freire's concept of "narration sickness" to help articulate the way in which "librarians tend to teach the evaluation of authority like the diagnosis of a disease by its list of symptoms" (Espinel 2016, 22). Another good example is the way in which Beatty reframes a typical Freirean idea—the liberation of education—as Freire's "death and rebirth of the educator." While maintaining the importance of this liberation for students, Freire uses this idea to explain how or why "the educator had to die as the exclusive teacher of the students in order to be reborn as an educator for freedom" (Beatty 2016, 216). Beatty then applies this to the work of librarians, whom he asserts should teach every component as if they were teaching it for the first time. In his particular lesson plan, this means that Beatty installs the Zotero software "from scratch" each time he teaches a session (216). If the *Handbook* is any indication, LIS authors have started to think more carefully about the breadth of Freire's ideas, even if those authors still prioritize the critique of banking education. This movement in the right direction needs to continue.

At the same time, LIS literature on information literacy too often neglects to mention critical theorists beyond Freire. Even the exceptions to this general rule do not fully examine all of the implications of critical theory for information literacy, much less the implications of social epistemology as seen through critical theory. The exceptions indicate that many other connections could be made between information literacy and critical theory. In addition, LIS scholars should start to read these theorists against each other, as their studies emphasize different aspects of the larger critical theory conversation. A hypothetical example of this would be a juxtaposition

of Foucault and Michel de Certeau and what that might mean for information literacy. Christine Pawley hints at this comparison in her 2003 article on information literacy, wherein she briefly points to Certeau and references Foucault in footnotes but does not actively analyze their thoughts separately or in comparison. Pawley draws on these scholars as part of her critique that librarians employ the generally accepted understandings of information and literacy without acknowledging the implications of these terms' Enlightenment heritage.

When Foucault discusses governmentality—the system that allows “the exercise of this . . . very complex . . . power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument” (2007, 108)—he describes a society that is controlled and managed. Under its unrestricted, though often subtle, reach, information literacy does not escape the control of governmentality. Learners and librarians alike discover, understand, and use information—or teach others how to do so—under its influence. Information literacy, seen through a Foucauldian lens, is primarily understood from the top down, in terms of what about it is determined.

Certeau complicates the picture presented by Foucault, countering that people use tactics to practice everyday life despite the *strategies* imposed by systems. Strategies, which parallel governmentality, determine what is proper and set up a grid within which all things must function. A tactic, however, “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (1984, xix). Without escaping the grid set up through strategies, individuals use tactics to make do within the grid, to resist what is supposed to happen without actually disrupting it. Certeau can teach librarians much about the art of making do in circumstances that individuals cannot otherwise dictate. Drawing on Certeau’s insights would allow librarians to emphasize a bottom-up point of view in order to understand better how and why individuals practice information literacy in reaction to systems, but not in ways determined by those systems. In many ways this reflects Amy Mark’s emphasis on the student perspective, but with the additional insight that student views will not necessarily topple existing paradigms, but that students find ways to make do within those paradigms.

Drawing on Certeau’s concepts would give librarians latitude to emphasize something that they increasingly recognize as important—the bottom-up perspective—in a unique way. Once again, the *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* provides a good example of the opportunities that are available to the critical information literacy community. Many of the authors, in their essays and lesson plans, articulate the importance of including or emphasizing marginalized voices and standpoints. With their critical backgrounds, the authors overwhelmingly

express a need to rethink the status quo of information literacy pedagogy with the inclusion of these perspectives. What is more interesting, however, from the context of a discussion on Certeau, are the couple of instances that hint at something like Certeau's idea of making do. For example, Gardner and Halpern (2016) engage in a critique of the predominant assessment models. The main thrust of their chapter, however, is to refocus assessment so that it can support a critical approach. The examples they give—such as the reflection of local campus contexts in the development of RAILS (Rubric Assessment for Information Literacy Skills)—may be articulated as examples of librarians making do within models that the authors otherwise label as neoliberal. In fact, though the authors do not cite Certeau, they make a very Certeau-like statement when they say that “although we cannot ‘secede’ from the institution and its power structure, we can ‘in our own ways, however small, clear out space for creating disruption, for thoughtful experimentation, and for subtle but satisfying interruption of the structures that govern us” (2016, 44-45).

A very different example shows up in Maura Seale's chapter. She describes her eleventh-grade American history teacher's work to incorporate critical thinking in a school system “in many cases interested more in discipline than learning” (2016, 229). Seale draws on her example to do much the same in library instruction sessions, or as she puts it, to “subtly bring in critical librarianship” (230). Once again, the author uses language that mirrors Certeau's concepts without drawing on Certeau.

Though it is easy to focus on the subversive aspects of Certeau's “tactics,” and though this does open an interesting line of inquiry, it is also worth considering the frequency of words like *tenacious* or *persistent* in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Certeau highlights the importance of thinking even about stubbornness, which does not have the active sense of subversive acts but does reflect his greater concern for making do under the circumstances. Stubbornness is a potentially worthwhile topic to explore in relationship to information literacy and the widespread resistance to searching for information in the “correct” way. Placing Foucault and Certeau in dialogue leads to the kind of questioning of assumptions that is central to critical theory as its theorists critique generally accepted social values and norms. More important, from the standpoint of social epistemology, this use of Certeau would reemphasize individual agency in epistemic choice.

Another gap in the literature is the recognition that information literacy is not an isolated activity, neither in academia nor in librarianship. LIS literature on information literacy—both in general and in critical theoretical approaches—concentrates on information literacy in academia to the exclusion of other types of libraries. Yet, there are obvious implications for all libraries. Social epistemology is not bound to specific communities, but recognizes that knowledge is contextual

and everyone's context is different. As learners seek and judge information, they draw on an almost infinite number of circumstances and experiences. These diverse conditions also lead them to use different kinds of libraries and resources outside of libraries. The exceptions in the scholarly literature, such as Valerie Hill's 2015 article describing how she used Minecraft to help elementary school students learn about digital citizenship and information literacy, should provide a foundation for further, more in-depth investigations.

In a similar fashion, librarians need to realize that information literacy is bound to the rest of the library. As Shera makes clear, all aspects of librarianship, such as collection development or cataloguing, are united under social epistemology. Even in the rare cases where LIS scholars recognize this relationship, they do not tie it together with information literacy, despite the fact that information literacy is integrated into everything that libraries and librarians do. By way of example, collection development, if done poorly, may call on learners to practice higher levels of information literacy in necessitating searches for sources outside of the library. In a similar manner, learners use library catalogues in the process of locating sources. The design of catalogues interacts with learners' levels of information literacy, either impeding or aiding their search for sources.

Even as librarians address such shortcomings, they must be cautious of a danger that lurks in their otherwise good critical work. A constant danger of the overall critical theory critique for information literacy derives from critical theory's overall goal of emancipation. As librarians seek to implement critical concepts—often designed to increase recognition of learners' own roles, responsibilities, and contributions—there is the potential for them to diminish their own authority, and that of other experts, which has a range of problematic implications. Critical theorists, who have always been wary of relativism, have engaged in their own conversations about this struggle. In social epistemology, however, relativism does not produce the same level of anxiety. Instead, it is a concern primarily in that it is a subject to be studied. The fields' different attitudes may be explained in part by their distinct approaches to agency: whereas critical theory focuses on the ways in which institutions and power constrain individuals' agency, social epistemology emphasizes the epistemic choices that individual agents continually make, even as systems play a role in those choices. In other words, the former primarily sees a lack of agency whereas the latter sees agency in action.

Critical information literacy scholars and practitioners share critical theorists' concerns about agency and authority, and yet this does not appear to be matched by the same level of concern about relativism. Much of the conversation in critical information literacy involves a reorientation towards collaboration and conversation

in an attempt to free individuals from networks of power over their knowledge. Without the accompanying caution about relativism, however, the field is in danger of relinquishing the benefits that come with the authority of expertise.

Gr Keer, one of the few LIS scholars to urge attentiveness to this risk, points to Freire's fears on the matter. Freire thought that his own writings were often misinterpreted to conflate "*authoritarianism with authority*," which in turn led some teachers "to cede all of their authority in the classroom" (2016, 69, emphasis Keer's). Freire considered this dangerous because, as teachers surrender their authority as subject experts, the authoritarian education system may assert its full power over the students.

Compare Keer's concern with Patrick Wilson's conclusions about second-hand knowledge. Wilson's thoughts are significant for considerations of authority from both an information literacy and a social epistemology perspective, and so worth looking at. However, his book also displays a complicated relationship to knowledge and authority. Wilson describes knowledge in this way: "All I know of the world beyond the narrow range of my own personal experience is what others have told me. It is all hearsay. But I do not count all hearsay as equally reliable. Some people know what they are talking about, others do not. Those who do are my cognitive authorities" (1983, 13). Thus, individuals have cognitive authority within specific contexts. An example may be helpful here: when a librarian and a library user who is also a musician are engaged in a conversation about how to locate scores, the librarian is in a position of cognitive authority in so far as he or she can explain how to use the catalogue to find the scores. However, the musician is a cognitive authority in the sense that he or she knows which of the scores best addresses his or her particular needs. Individuals' authority depends on how they are situated, their context. Librarians "know what they are talking about" when it comes to the library and their experiences in that context. Musicians "know what they are talking about" when it comes to music and the experiences they have gained from the contexts of studying, practicing, or performing music.

Wilson spends much of his book exploring how individuals can actually know or recognize authority. His answer is consistently that they cannot actually know or recognize cognitive authority without doubt. Indeed, he argues that "skepticism is a highly appropriate attitude to take toward the productions of the knowledge industry" (1983, 195). John Budd interprets this stance as one that is "unabashedly relativistic" (2001, 225). This should not stop us from employing Wilson's useful distinction that cognitive authority is situated, arising from the experiences one gains in specific contexts. However, it should lead us to consider what he was missing in his

analysis that led to his pessimism, and to consider the implications of that deficiency for information literacy's investigation of authority.

The debates about relativism, knowledge, and authority are too complex to allow a full analysis here. However, librarians who wish to engage in that debate in order to better understand its implications for information literacy would benefit from focusing on the different approaches to agency, described earlier, between critical theory and information literacy. If librarians can maintain critical theory's wariness of diminished agency within power structures while simultaneously appreciating individual agency in epistemic choice as a worthwhile object of study, they will be better positioned to articulate the multiple facets of information literacy.

A small, but significant, difference between Shera's and critical theory's conceptions of social epistemology comes into play here. Where many critical theorists would claim that society is, for the most part, not aware of the power dimensions of epistemology's social integration, Shera seems to argue that society is aware, at least to some extent. He gives this impression in setting up "scientific epistemology" as "concerned with what man cannot know—i.e., the limits and constraints of human knowing" (1973, 96) and then contrasting this with social epistemology. Shera explains that because scientific epistemology only studied these restrictions against the background of individual intellectual processes, it could not move past them. However, he says that if the parameters for the investigation of intellectual processes were to be expanded to include complex social organizations, there would be sufficient grounds to move beyond what we *cannot* know to better understand what we *can* know. By opening the investigation to complex social organizations, Shera implies the possible inclusion of power structures. When formal social epistemology investigates the dynamics surrounding the choices that individuals make so that they can know—especially when it looks at the actors involved in those choices—the field may be doing exactly what Shera envisioned.

This distinction has significant implications for information literacy and the assumption of its emancipatory potential. The Alexandria Proclamation argues that "information literacy and lifelong learning are the beacons of the Information Society, illuminating the courses to development, prosperity and freedom" (WSIS 2005, para. 1). This assumption is evident even in the examples highlighted earlier. For example, Swanson may not be writing about development and prosperity, but he, like many of the other authors already discussed, does have much to say about freedom. In Swanson's article, this involves students working against political biases.

The acknowledgement that greater awareness and understanding—the goals of information literacy—could lead to greater agency has been a contentious issue within critical theory. Morrow and Brown point to the decline of an adherence to

Marxism in the Frankfurt School as one factor in “the disillusionment of the inner group with the potentially liberating effects of empirical research” (1994, 109). Because of the broad reach of the critical theory research program, under which LIS theorists, too, use critical theories originating in the Frankfurt School, information literacy falls under that criticism. Even though critical theory has itself moved past this point of crisis, the concerns evident there are still relevant to discussions about agency in information literacy, and the literature on information literacy should address this. When the literature employs social epistemology to that end, it may gain flexibility in considering the fact that, regardless of systemic constraints on agency, individuals do make epistemic choices and that these need to be understood.

Conclusion

Obviously, there is much to consider in bringing together information literacy and social epistemology. Fortunately, the social epistemology perspective does not require new approaches to information literacy. Instead, it offers a complementary way to think about the same questions and approaches. Social epistemology effectively offers a fuller engagement with the same questions with which information literacy has always been concerned. It should remind librarians that Shera was on to something when he recognized that the work librarians do is already of a social epistemological nature, and they should keep this in mind when doing their work. Yet, greater integration of social epistemology into information literacy does offer the possibility of new directions for research and practice beyond what librarians already do. LIS practitioners and researchers should ask newly focused questions informed by a greater awareness of what Goldman calls mental choices made by individuals as they seek and incorporate new knowledge and of the many contextual factors that affect those mental choices.

Because social epistemology clarifies how both information literacy and critical theory deal with the social context of epistemic issues, it suggests a new way of seeing the relationship between the two. Morrow and Brown summarize critical theory as “nothing more and nothing less than a theory of the necessity of overcoming distorted communication as part of an endless process of collective learning” (1994, 321). With a slightly different emphases, this statement could just as easily be about social epistemology or information literacy. It is natural that the LIS information literacy literature is seeing greater engagement with critical theorists and that this engagement bears the mark of social epistemology.

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