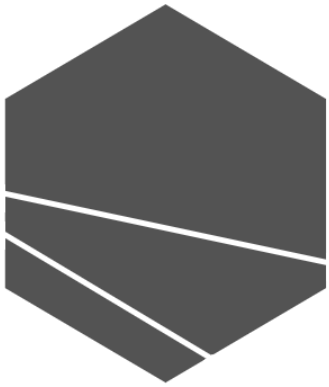
ISSN 2563-2493

Pathfinder

A CANADIAN JOURNAL FOR INFORMATION SCIENCE STUDENTS AND EARLY CAREER PROFESSIONALS



The Proceedings of the 2021 Forum for Information Professionals

Knowledge as Resistance: Kooky Academic Theories in Action

Volume 2 | Issue 1

With special thanks to Michael McNichol, Jenn Laskosky and Sam Popowich for their introductory remarks and to the organizing committee for the Forum for Information Professionals

Pathfinder
A Canadian Journal for Information Science
Students and Early Career Professionals

Theory and Practice: Introduction to the FiP 2021 Conference

Michael McNichol[1], Jenn Laskosky[2]

[1] School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta. Email: mcnichol@ualberta.ca
[2] School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta. Email: jlasosk@ualberta.ca

To Cite:

McNichol, M., & Laskosky, J. (2021). Theory and practice: Introduction to the FiP 2021 Conference. [Special Edition]. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals, 2*(1). https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder45

Abstract

In this short introduction, the co-chairs of the 2021 FIP Conference discuss the effect the pandemic had on the conference, the importance of theory to practice, and the moral importance of theory to librarianship.

Keywords: Theory, Student Life, Pandemic

The Forum for Information Professionals' (FiP) 2020 conference was one of the last in-person events held at the University of Alberta before the COVID-19 pandemic caused the closure of University buildings and the mass transfer of learning from in-person to online. In the year since, the Executive Committee for FiP 2021 struggled with a new responsibility: how do we hold a conference that is pandemic-safety compliant while still ensuring that we provide space for the best student and early career professional presentations possible?

Moving to a virtual platform, where we could ensure that both our presenters and our audience were safeguarded against the virus, was an obvious choice for practicality. It raised a number of questions, though. By moving online, could we serve a larger audience? Could more people be included? Could we make accommodations, such as

ISSN: 2563-2493
DOI: https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder45

including closed captioning, that would not have been possible, within our student group budget, if the conference were to take place in-person? What would an online conference *mean*?

These questions naturally brought to mind the problem of *theory*. In the library, as in so much of our society, theory is treated as if it were a luxury, a “pie in the sky” rumination that has little to do with the lived reality of individual people. Theory is what the eggheads do in their ivory towers; the tyranny of practicality holds sway in the real world. When the premier of Alberta, Jason Kenney, mocked the 2020 federal Throne Speech for having included “kooky academic theories like intersectionality,” he was speaking for a certain view of theory itself.

As the co-chairs of the conference, our core job is to guide the proceedings and to make sure that the other members of the Executive Committee are supported to complete their work. When “Kooky Academic Theories” was suggested as a conference theme, meant as a satirical jab at this viewpoint, we did not anticipate that the members of FiP 2021 would agree, nor that the library community at large would be so interested in a conference focused on the theoretical aspects of librarianship. But this speaks to a different view of theory, one that is perhaps coming into prominence in libraries, namely, as our keynote speaker, Sam Popowich, said, that " at its simplest, all theory is just this: a way of explaining, making sense of the complex material of our lives as it relates to other people’s lives” (Popowich, 2021). By placing a relation at the centre of our thinking, rather than by focusing only on the individual, there is a moral aspect to theory. In this sense, knowledge becomes an act of resistance.

In this light, our presenters’ work is incredible. Although all either students or early career professionals, they critically engaged with problems such as the overwhelming Whiteness of the double-blind peer review process in scholarly publishing, the need for dementia-friendly reading materials, and the concept of value as related to special collections. They completed exceptional scholarship, such as performing thematic analysis of online posts to identify the information behaviours and needs of non-binary and gender nonconforming individuals with binary transgender individuals. They were brave and tackled issues such as the serious inequities faced by trans peoples in libraries.

We would like to sincerely thank our Executive Committee, without whom this conference would not have occurred: Hannah Friesen, Abirami Muthukumar, Karla Mallach, Rynnelle Wiebe, Lakshmi Balaraman, Christine Coulson, Christian Brown, and Tyler Chawner. We would also like to extend a special thank you to Shane Klein from Tech in Ed at the University of Alberta for his invaluable technical assistance.

While it may have been difficult to move the conference online, we are exceedingly proud of the work that FiP 2021 was able to showcase this year. Although it may be some time before we meet again in person, we will continue to focus on the “kooky academic theories” that help make libraries, and our lives, better.

References

Popowich, S. (2021, February 12). *The Onus of Explanation* [Speech transcript]. Forum for Information Professionals 2021: Knowledge as Resistance: ‘Kooky Academic Theories’ in Action, Edmonton, AB, Canada.

Pathfinder
A Canadian Journal for Information Science
Students and Early Career Professionals

The Onus of Explanation

Sam Popowich[1]

[1] *Library and Museums, University of Alberta,* Email: Sam.Popowich@ualberta.ca

To Cite:

Popowich,S. (2021). The Onus of Explanation. [Special Edition]. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals, 2*(1). https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder46

Abstract

This manuscript contains the text of the key note speech given at the 2021 Forum for Information Professionals.

Keywords: Theory, Intersectionality, Critical Theory, Ideology

I am speaking to you from Treaty 6 territory – specifically amiskwaciwâskahikan or Edmonton – traditional territory of many First People including Cree, Blackfoot, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, Inuit, and Métis. Land acknowledgements sometimes refer to being a “guest” on Indigenous land, but it is important to acknowledge that my being here is no happy accident, but the product of several centuries’ of colonial expansion and appropriation, the dialectic of power and violence on the prairies. The fact that I was born in Treaty 1 territory – Winnipeg – is another necessary fact about my life. The fact that it is a fact – and that the treaty framework, the cultural, political, and economic structures of colonialism, and the immemorial societies of First Nations all predate me and, in many ways, determine my life – are important elements that I want to touch on throughout this talk.

I want to talk to you today about the way particular kinds of explanation, particular ways of understanding the world, are vilified and attacked in public discourse. In September of last year, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney criticized the federal

ISSN: 2563-2493
DOI: https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder46

government's throne speech for not addressing provincial demands. "There was space for every bright shiny object," Kenney said, "every possible political distraction, kooky academic theories like intersectionality found their way into yesterday's throne speech"[1]. Besides the dismissal of a theoretical tool like intersectionality as "kooky", it is significant that Kenney draws a line between irrelevant distractions – political and academic – and some other position – focused and relevant – that he claims to take. If intersectionality is political and academic, then it implies that Kenney's alternative is somehow not-political (despite Kenney being the head of state in the province of Alberta) and focused on some real-world which the academy is insulated from. Kenney's condemnation of theories like intersectionality is part of a broader trend. At the same time Kenney was responding to the throne speech, in late September 2020, Donald Trump issued an executive order attacking the – quote – "malign ideology" of anti-racist thinking, Critical Race Theory in particular. Critical Race Theory and other anti-racist ways of understanding and explaining the world of racial capitalism were, in Trump's view:

> contrary to the fundamental premises underpinning our Republic: that all individuals are created equal and should be allowed an equal opportunity under the law to pursue happiness and prosper based on individual merit.[2]

Like Kenney, Trump has a particular view of society that he wants to present as unchallengeable fact, real, solid, concrete, unquestionable. For both Kenney and Trump what they possess is clear and obvious truth; what they decry is ideology, manipulation, falsification. What I want to talk about here are the power relations expressed by being the one able to draw such distinctions, and the purpose of excluding, condemning, and dismissing alternative explanations from the ones put forward by people in power.

I was born and grew up, as I say, in Winnipeg – also a Métis homeland. Treaty 1 was signed in 1871 by the crown and leaders of the Anishinaabe and Swampy Cree of

[1] Woods, Mel. "Jason Kenney on Throne Speech: Intersectionality a 'Kooky Academic Theory'. *HuffPost* September 24, 2020.
[2] Trump, Donald. E.O. 13950 of Sep 22, 2020; the UK government followed suit a month later, see Trilling, Daniel. "Why is the UK government suddenly targeting 'critical race theory'? *Guardian* October 23, 2020.

what is currently Southern Manitoba. A year earlier, an act of parliament had created the province in an attempt to decrease tensions between settlers and Métis at the end of the Red River Resistance. Would it be possible to recite this list of names, dates, and descriptions without trying to work out how they are connected? How the various kinds of relationships – between people, between people and the land, between people and institutions like the crown or parliament – formed a context into which my parents' families settled? The different and interlocking histories of Ukraine in the last phase of the Russian Empire, of white-collar workers in post-war Wales, of the settlement of the prairie based on displacement and oppression of Indigenous peoples, of the rise of Winnipeg as "The Chicago of the North" – all these provide another rich and complex context into which I was born and which I have a responsibility to try to comprehend. I don't think it would be possible to try to understand how all those processes interlock to form a material and cultural matrix which produced me without some kind of framework, some sense of how these kinds of histories relate to each other, change, and develop over time. In very real ways these matrices and frameworks help to explain who I am and how I come to know the world.

I'm going to get a bit ahead of myself to say that, at its simplest, all theory is just this: a way of explaining, making sense of the complex material of our lives as it relates to other people's lives, living and dead. But there are many people who would say that on the contrary it is possible to simply "know" these facts, these names, and dates, and institutions – and that such knowledge doesn't require any kind of framework to meet the facts halfway in order to produce real understanding. We'll get back to this idea – that theory is somehow optional – in a minute. For now, I want to tell you a little bit about how and why I came to thinking about theory, because there's another view of theory which is similar to the one that claims theory is unnecessary. This other position argues that theory is, well, theoretical, by which is meant something like a fantasy, an illusion, or a flight of imagination – it's not real, has no connection to what is thought of as the real world. But there is no clear distinction between the real world and theory, because that would suggest that people could live their lives without thinking about them and at least trying to understand them. And I don't think this is possible; an unconscious, intuitive call to make communicable connections, to make the vast data of

experience not just coherent but verbal, is one of the things that distinguishes us from animals.

I was born specifically in the North End of Winnipeg, which has long been a byword of left-wing radicalism. Many of the leaders of the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919 were from the North End. In the racialized class system of early prairie capitalism, the North End was the zone of poor immigrants mostly from Central and Eastern Europe, and Ashkenazy Jews were some of the most active members in the various left-wing organizations, as another North Ender, Leo Panitch – one of Canada's major socialist intellectuals who died in December – often spoke about[3]. Ukrainians too – Ukrainians from the Russian Empire who were not, as later Ukrainian immigrants tended to be, anti-communist – were heavily involved in radical working-class institutions, like the People's Co-Op, which lasted from 1928 until the early 1990s[4]. Across the railyards from the North End was downtown, and south of downtown was the preserve of the Anglo-Scottish, protestant settler elite. I was born nearly 60 years after the strike, 106 years after the signing of Treaty 1, and yet the same class, ethnic, racial, and religious divisions remained in force. The major class line in Winnipeg was and remains the railyards just North of Downtown. As new waves of immigration arrived, they often occupied downtown itself while the North End came to include more and more people moving into the city from the Southern Manitoba First Nations. The complexion of the North End has changed significantly since I lived there, but this has only served to underline the complexity of ethnic, cultural, and class relationships in the city. This complexity needs to be understood, if only to the extent that it needs to be navigated by those who grow up in it. As I grew up, my social world expanded to include the middle-class south end of the city and I was introduced to class conflict; I went to university, where after the end of the Cold War, liberal thinking appeared triumphant. At eighteen I started working for AT&T doing internet technical support, which introduced me to the alienation of wage labour. This experience led me to Marxism as a way to understand why this "good job" was so soul-destroying. All of these dynamics had to be

[3] Panitch, Leo. 2018. "The Radical Ferment of Winnipeg's Jewish Socialist Politics". *Reality Asserts Itself*, March 4, 2018.
[4] Mochoruk, Jim and Kardash, Nancy. *The People's Co-Op: The Life and Times of a North End Institution* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. 2000).

navigated, and this navigation has very real consequences for who one is and how one exists in the world. Power – which lies behind the relationships I'm talking about – is quick to discipline those who step out of line.

What I am trying to get at is this: that there is no clear division between theory and practice. Theory grows out of attempts to make sense of our lives, especially as aspects of them are permitted or forbidden, encouraged or constrained, by people and things outside of ourselves. Almost universally, Marxism, feminism, Indigenous activism, Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory, and many more take seriously the fact that individuals can only be understood as aspects of larger social structures, and for this they are attacked as "ideological" because they reject the common-sense truths of capitalist society, such as individualism. And such theories are ideological. But they are ideologies knowingly and consciously adopted. There is no non-ideological perspective on things, and those who rail hardest against ideology are always simply subject to an ideology they will not or cannot admit: an ideology which presents itself as the common-sense self-evident truth about the world is a mystification and a lie.

In his 1975 book Social Justice and the City, Marxist geologist David Harvey succinctly describes these two kinds of ideology. There is on the one hand, he says, "the unaware expression of the underlying ideas and beliefs which attach to a particular social situation", and on the other hand, there is "the aware and critical exposition of ideas in their social context which is frequently called ideology in the west"[5]. This dual definition is helpful, I think, because it allows us to reclaim, if we like, the idea of ideology from the debased and oversimplified definition used by politicians. For politicians, ideology is anything that departs from the common-sense, realistic, liberal norm, the perspective – they argue – of the world as it is, without theory. By contrast, we might equate ideology in Harvey's second sense with critical theory itself. By understanding ideology in this way, not only do we reclaim the "critical exposition of ideas in their social context" for feminism, Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory, Marxism, anarchism, etc, but we are able to understand that anytime someone claims that their position is non-ideological, they are themselves under the sway of ideology in the first sense, something they do not acknowledge and are perhaps even unconscious

[5] Harvey, David. *Social Justice and the City* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009): 18.

of. If the role of critical theory is to emancipate through explanation, the role of these unconscious ideologies is to support, maintain, and reproduce the ideas and values that make racial, colonial, patriarchal capitalism possible. One added benefit of the second way of understanding ideology is that we can understand how our own ideologies are the products of our own histories, our own social contexts. Feminism is an explanation of what it is to live in the context of patriarchal social relations; Critical Race Theory an explanation of what it is to live under white supremacy. And just as those social contexts change over time, our theories and explanations can and do change as well. Only by reclaiming the second way of seeing ideology can we understand how our knowledge of the world changes along with society itself. Any position which thinks of itself as non-ideological is unable to do that, unable to historicize and contextualize its own understanding of the world.

This point is crucially important for library and information studies, but it is one excluded from mainstream LIS discourse, relegated to special subfields like critical librarianship. We can understand, now, how and why some ideological positions are openly described as ideological, while others obscure their own ideology by making them appear realistic, natural, or common-sense. Others may have “kooky theories”, but we have hard-headed, evidence based, empirical fact. But why should empirical, common-sense, non-theoretical perspectives on the world carry more weight? Put another way, why should ideology be considered a problem, something to be avoided, in some sense, an error? There are many different answers to that question. It is bound up with political, economic, and social changes that go back at least to the Renaissance. One way of approaching the question is to say that the scientific revolution of the 17th century and the “applied science” that enabled the development of capitalism were better at producing the kind of knowledge needed to control natural processes and produce profit. This combination came to be described as “reason” and anything which departed from it was by definition “irrational”. The irrational was disordered, inefficient, unprofitable, unscientific, and very likely in thrall to older “superstitious” views of the world. The self-confirming connection between knowledge, control over the natural world, and profit produced a dynamic that is still very much with

us today. We can think of surveillance or platform capitalism, artificial intelligence, dismissal of Indigenous knowledge, and a host of other examples.

In the post-war period, LIS tended to align itself with this perspective, adopting positivist social-science as its model and benefiting from the role of information and knowledge in the military-industrial complex. Libraries have always been complicit in this form of knowledge colonization. The process of industrial expansion led to great advances and improvements in standards of living for many (though by no means most) of the people on the planet. But it also produced colonial expansion as a way to increase capitalist natural resource extraction, which required that something be done about the people already living on the land who disagreed that it should be used in that way. Theories of racial superiority were developed to make this process easier and more palatable to white sensibilities. It thereby produced white supremacy, as those who saw themselves as masters of the planet (white, male, rational, profitable, scientific, controllers of natural processes and dominators of the natural world) extended this mastery over all others. In doing so they came up with ways to distinguish between themselves and those others, and the lowest common denominator was whiteness. Whiteness was constructed as a way to guarantee and rationalize the processes of enslavement and exploitation the colonizers were already engaged in. One aspect of whiteness, then, is ideological: it serves to support and maintain the status quo, making the existing conditions easier to live with, and as a consequence more difficult, if not impossible, to change.

So what happens to those who, by definition, are irrational or Other, are too ideological, or too emotional, too unintelligent, too unthinking, too unfeeling – criticisms aimed at various times by white, patriarchal capitalists against workers, anarchists, white women, LGBTQ people, and people of colour – what happens to us when we want to raise objections, demand explanations, or put forward explanations of our own? The onus is on us to frame our positions and our arguments in “rational” ways, in ways that use the language of science, of capital, of whiteness, of patriarchy, requiring all the extra work of translation before – maybe – what we are saying can be heard by those with power.

I think many of us probably known this quote from Toni Morrison, who said that:

> The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.[6]

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor put the same idea more quote "acceptably" – because phrased more rationally or scientifically – when he discussed the dominance of individualist social theories over other theories that place more weight on social relationships, structures, and dynamics. Taylor argued that individualistic, "non-ideological" theories always have the upper hand. These views "always seem nearer to common sense," he wrote, "more immediately available". He went on to say that "Even though [such theories] don't stand up very well in argument… even though a modicum of explanation is enough to show their inadequacy, nevertheless this explanation is continually necessary"[7]. He calls this the "onus of explanation", which always falls on the people whose theories, perspectives, and lived experiences are ignored, repressed, or otherwise dismissed from the dominant way of understanding the world. What I find interesting about this is that even this distinction – between what is dominant and what is subaltern, what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, what is rational and what is irrational – all of which are functions not of inherent differences but of power – even this distinction itself is denied by the dominant ideology of patriarchal racial capitalism, which is liberalism itself. One of the main tenets of liberalism is its absolute commitment

[6] Morrison, Toni. Portland State University, 1975.
[7] Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 196.

to pluralism, to the idea of free expression beyond the reach of power. But this is a myth to let power sleep at night. Liberalism is dominant to such an extent that the political philosopher Raymond Geuss has written that "we seem to have no realistic alternative to it"[8].

Liberal pluralism, by claiming to accept all differences ends up flattening out and ignoring difference altogether. We can see this in the rhetoric of "post-racial colour blindness" and "all sides" discourse. This rhetoric and discourse are a key component of Intellectual Freedom. Which we will look at in a moment. There's a psychoanalytical way to look at all this, seeing the dominant ideologies as repressing the unacceptable aspects of colonialism, of racism, of gender and sexual oppression. And there's some truth to that, but there are many other ways to understand how ideology works. But in a way, how this process functions is less important than that it functions. The onus of explanation – the insistence on different views, different knowledges (for example, Indigenous ways of knowing), different lived experiences – are ignored unless they are forced into the homogenous form of scientific language, civil discussion, rational or logical argument, and the list goes on. The onus of explanation is an onus of dismissal, an onus of erasure. So, to return to Jason Kenney's "kooky academic theories like intersectionality", I want to look at one of that theory's key texts. While the term "intersectionality" may have been coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989[9], the concept came out the work of Black feminist groups like the Combahee River Collective, whose statement in 1977 introduced identity politics and the idea of interlocking systems of oppression into social justice work[10].

Similarly, in her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", Audre Lorde – who was a librarian – challenged the exclusion of difference from the (white, liberal) women's movement and the liberal principle of tolerance that underpinned it. Lorde wrote that:

[8] Geuss, Raymond. *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009): 11.
[9] Crenshawe, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, Issue 1, Article 8: 139-167.
[10] Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Harmarket, 2017).

> advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must not merely be tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.[11]

This is such a clear expression of why the onus of explanation is always required: because theories like this challenge the homogeneity, the tolerant reformism, the unwillingness to change the structure of the social world. I want to pick out one phrase from this quote: "Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening". I have already mentioned pluralism, but one of liberalism's other main commitments which, again, goes back to the earliest days of developing capitalism, is a radical individualism. In the social contract theory of Hobbes, the state of nature is a world of individuals engaged in a "war of all against all" and whose lives are, famously, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"[12]. Only a strong monarch can hold the power to weld these individuals into a society and keep them from killing each other. However, we know that such a state of nature has never existed: human beings have only ever known the interdependency of social relations. Hobbes' theory is an illustration, not of individuals in an ancient state of nature, but of the new individualism made possible, and indeed required, by capitalist profitability. The interdependency of social relations is therefore framed as something which infringes on individual liberty, and therefore something to be feared, rather than what makes individuality possible at all. We will

[11] Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools will never Dismantle the Master's House". In *Sister Outsider,* 110-113 (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984): 111.

[12] "Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and which is the worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutal, and short." Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan, With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1688* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994): 76.

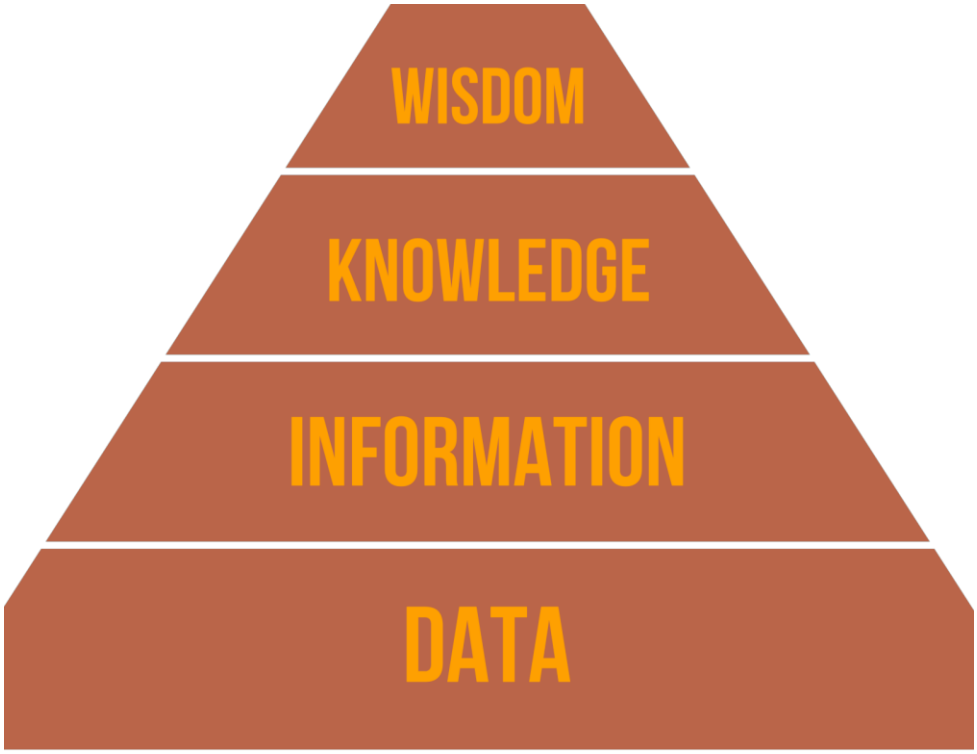
return to this in a moment. Hobbes' theory seems to us now to be quite extreme and disconcerting. A more familiar, more palatable, form of the social contract derives from John Locke.

In Locke's theory, the power of the monarch is replaced by a representative government held accountable to the body of individuals. A system of checks and balances helps to mediate the different opinions, views, and perspectives of the citizens. This raises the question of who is a citizen? Who gets to participate? Locke – the architect of liberal democratic theory – was an investor and shareholder in the Royal African Company, which shipped more slaves to the New World than any other institution. Locke also wrote justifications of the doctrine of terra nullius which allowed the British crown to take over Indigenous lands in North America as if they were vacant. It is obvious that Locke's concept of citizenship, of participation, does not apply to everyone. In fact, the individuals Locke has in mind are, unsurprisingly, just like him: white, male, property-owning, involved in capitalist enterprise. In a word, bourgeois.

Locke's political theory was intended for others like him, and so the "tolerance of difference" only needed to extend to trivial things like whether a particular (white, male, property-owning) royal should be excluded from the line of succession. The principle of tolerance was, therefore, baked in to liberal political and social theory which, since that theory is "common-sense", "realistic", and "non-ideological", is in fact inadequate to dealing with a world where women, queer people, people of colour, people of other cultures and ethnicities can't simply be ignored, oppressed, or assimilated, but have to be taken seriously. The interdependency of the contemporary world, as Audre Lorde identified, strikes fear into the hearts of those who benefit from the racist, sexist, oppressive structures of settler-colonial, patriarchal capitalism. To be born into these matrices means to inherit their ideologies, their perspectives, their cultures as normal and natural. They are internalized within us before we are even born. And so the onus of explanation is an attempt to displace the incumbent, to convince ourselves and others that there are better, more fitting, more just ways of understanding, knowing, and changing the world. Changing ideologies is hard work. Critical theory is hard work. The onus of explanation leads to exhaustion, as Toni Morrison suggested in the earlier quote.

But again, critical theory can help us understand how and why this is the case. And understanding is a core component of transformation. In one of Marx's most famous aphorisms, the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach of 1846, he writes that "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it"[13]. This aphorism is often, and rightly, interpreted to mean that knowledge, thought, wisdom, philosophy**.** have to be harnessed to social and political improvement. But there is another way to understand it, which is that theory and practice are never separate, distinct activities. Our lived experience, our reactions to the world we inherit, influence when and how we encounter alternative ways of understanding the world, and those new explanations, new truths, new knowledges, cannot help but materially influence the world in turn.

This has grave implications for library and information studies. For example, we all know this graph:



[13] Marx, Karl. "Theses on Feuerbach." In Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, 615-617 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976): 617.

Sometimes the DIKW model is presented as a directional chain, sometimes as a hierarchy, as it is here. In both cases, however, data is presented as foundational, as raw, uninterpreted, natural facts about the world. This is a positivist epistemological model, intimately connected with bourgeois, liberal ways of thinking and knowing. One thing that critical theories often have in common is the idea that, because we are born into a pre-existing social, cultural, and political world, "facts" are always already pre-constructed for us, pre-interpreted. The knowledge of the world that we inherit swings back around to the beginning of the chain or the bottom of the pyramid. The DIKW model would be better presented as a loop or circle; what would the consequences for LIS be then? Nietzsche, in an attack on the kind of positivism represented by the DIKW model, wrote:

> Against positivism, which halts at phenomena – "there are only facts" – I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself": perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing.[14]

In the same section, Nietzsche pushes back against the claim that what he offers instead is the "kooky theory" of pure subjectivism, the impossibility of any and all claims to truth. He insists that there is truth, but truth is never simply given, natural, non-interpreted – we would say now that truth is socially constructed. Truth is perspectival – we come to it from and with our lived experience. It is political, economic, inextricable from power. So when someone like Jason Kenney complains that "kooky academic theories like intersectionality" have become part of public discourse, he is holding on to a positivist insistence on facts – normal, natural, immediately available – as part of his political agenda. He isn't wrong that Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, Queer Theory, and Marxism are ideological in the sense that they too have political agendas. But critical theory embraces its political agenda, precisely because its point is not to simply interpret the world, but to change it, to make it better. It doesn't get more political than that. The denial of ideology, the insistence on natural, realistic, common sense facts, is put forward as neutral, non-political, technical, objective, unbiased. And this

[14] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to* Power (New York: Vintage Books, 1968): 267.

position is deeply integrated with liberal political philosophy, which sees its role as facilitating the technical control of natural and human resources for the expansion of profit, and in all other senses getting out of people's (some people's) ability to accumulate wealth. This is the perspective of Trump's executive order, which sees the role of the state as ensuring but getting out of the way of individuals' pursuit of happiness and their own idea of the good life. Similarly, it is the dominant conception of Intellectual Freedom in librarianship.

A lot has been written about Intellectual Freedom both from a historical and a philosophical perspective. Toni Samek's *Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in American Librarianship*[15] is vital to understanding the larger social debates around the development of Social Responsibility in the 1960s; the *Library Juice Press Handbook on Intellectual Freedom*[16] does a good job laying out the accepted philosophical framework of IF. But generally speaking, the question that remains unanswered for IF is what kind of freedom we are talking about. Indeed, this question is almost completely unasked, because it is taken for granted. It is the freedom of isolated individuals free from social conditioning and obligations. As a result, the kind of freedom meant by Intellectual Freedom is, like all other aspects of liberal political thought, considered to be natural, normal, realistic, common-sense, and obvious. The onus of explanation is on critical theory to show how such a conception of freedom is none of those things. It is, instead, a construction designed to shore up and support a particular form of social power.

For example: Donald Trump's executive order referred to "equal opportunity". Equal opportunity is one of the two principles of justice formulated by John Rawls in his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice*[17]. Rawls' book fundamentally changed political theory by giving liberalism a new foundation during the transition to neoliberalism in the 1970s. But Rawls' principle of equal opportunity is itself based on Isaiah Berlin's concept of

[15] Samek, Toni. *Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in American Librarianship, 1967-1974* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001).
[16] Alfino, Mark and Koltutsky, Laura (Eds.) *The Library Juice Press Handbook of Intellectual Freedom: Concepts, Cases, and Theories* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2014).
[17] Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice, Revised Edition* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999).

negative liberty[18]. Another of Rawls' principles – the principle of difference – maps onto Berlin's concept of "positive liberty". For Berlin, negative liberty is marked by the absence of constraint. People are free insofar as they are not prevented from doing what they want (Berlin ignores the question of how people come to want particular things in the first place). The role of the liberal state and society is to maximize "negative liberty" by removing constraints and obstacles. Negative liberty recognizes that people can have different conceptions of what the good is and how to follow it, and it is not the place of the state or society to try to foster or force adherence to any of those conceptions of the good. That would be what Berlin calls "positive liberty" and it leads, in his view, to the paradoxical position of "people being forced to be free", that is totalitarianism.

Needless to say, Berlin thinks negative liberty is just and proper, and rejects positive liberty as not really liberty at all. Rawls was in many ways responding to Berlin by trying to balance negative and positive liberty in a single theory. This was made necessary because of the explosion of demands for positive conceptions of the good in the late 1960s, such as the Civil Rights Movement, Second Wave Feminism, the Gay Rights Movement, and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement. These were also the demands that led to the reorientation of Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility that Samek discusses. Rawls took these demands seriously – he was a supporter of students' rights to protest the Vietnam War and engage in civil disobedience – but he was bound by the liberal preference for negative liberty. Rawls developed his principles of justice as a way to integrate these two conceptions without leading to totalitarianism. The principle of equality of opportunity is primary in Rawls' system – it claims that every individual must have a merit based equal opportunity to succeed in a liberal society. The difference principle argues that a departure from strict equality is legitimate if it improves the lot of the worst off.

In the US, the constitution emphasizes the principle of equality while in Canada the charter of rights emphasizes the difference principle. It is from this distinction that, for example, differences between American and Canadian legal thought around

[18] Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty." In *Liberty: Incorporating 'Four Essays on Liberty'*, 166-218 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

freedom of speech/expression arises. But pride of place in Rawls – as in all subsequent liberal theories – rests on negative liberty. The thing about negative liberty, though, is that it assumes that there is a non-constructed world out there in which individuals can act freely, a real world of concrete facts that individuals can dominate and transform, as long as the state and the unrealistic members of society with their unrealistic academic theories of social good would just get out of the way. Funnily enough, this concrete real world of facts and control looks, for Berlin and Rawls, just like the existing world of resource extraction, representative government, private property, contract, and exchange. Negative liberty means small-government neoliberalism, getting out of the way of property development, ecological exploitation, attacks on labour, and dismissing questions of structural oppression as ideological and academic by insisting on the (spurious) equality of every individual in society.

The rejection of kooky academic theories, of Marxism, feminism, queer theory, disability theory, Critical Race Theory, is all part of a political project to maintain the legitimacy of patriarchal, cisheteronormaitve, ableist, racial capitalism. The legal conception of individual free speech or free expression is part of this project as well. As a consequence, it follows that Intellectual Freedom as a library value must also be understood in this sense. It is bound by the principle of equality of opportunity and the concept negative liberty. It plays a role in upholding capitalist social, economic, and political relations. And the onus of explanation rests on those of us who see alternative ways of understanding freedom itself.

But let's return for a moment to the issue of facts. Facts may be perspectival, but they are still facts. They are necessary. We can't do anything about them. The fact that I was born where I was, when I was, is necessary for me. The fact that I learned English as a first language means that the culture, books, commercials, pop songs, movies, TV shows, political debates, schooling, etc, were all done from a single cultural and political perspective. I can't change these facts. Wittgenstein once wrote "In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen"[19]. Any conception of freedom must engage seriously with this question of historical necessity.

[19] "6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists – and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does

Earlier, when I spoke about the fear of interdependency, the need to keep things and people and concepts separated and isolated, it occurred to me that what I was really getting at was the standard logical way of thinking about the world. The logical principle of identity states that a thing is identical to itself: an apple is an apple. The logical principle of contradiction states that a thing cannot be something and not be something at the same time: an apple can't be both red and not-red. The logical principle of the excluded middle states that given two contradictory statements, one must be true and the other false: if "the apple is red" is true, then "the apple is not-red" must be false. These logical "laws" are all based on the idea that things and concepts can easily be separated and isolated. Every fact, in this view, can be investigated and comprehended in isolation from all others. Every individual is isolated and self-determining. And we can see this in the DIKW model: each element is its own isolated thing: data is not information, information is not knowledge. Furthermore, just as an apple is always an apple under the traditional laws of logic – it is never a seed and never a leftover core – so the DIKW model is static and eternal, unchanging. Thinking that this can be so is one of the ways traditional logic is pressed into service to support the status quo as logical, natural, true, real, and unable to be changed.

As an individual, based on this logic, I have nothing to do with either the world I grew up in, the languages, laws, customs, and structures of power of that world, or the other people amongst whom I live. I am an isolated, atomic individual with no history, completely free to determine my path in life. This is the social ontology on which Berlin's negative liberty, and hence Rawls' theory of justice, is based, and it is an illusion. Indeed, it often comes close to being an outright lie, as when Margaret Thatcher claimed that "there is no such thing as society, there are only men and women". But this illusion too goes back to the origins of capitalism, the origins of liberalism, as we saw when we looked at social contract theory with its idea of the state of nature composed of isolated individuals at war with each other. It is a hard notion to challenge. But this is precisely what critical theories and theories of social construction do challenge. Back in

have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental." Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001): 86. I would disagree with Wittgenstein that this makes the world purely "accidental". Rather, I would side with Spinoza and say that this makes the world "necessary".

1857 Marx criticized this “age-old” view of isolated individuals, which he considered Robinson Crusoe-style myths. Marx wrote that “an individual outside society… is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other”[20].

Which brings me back to my own development. Born into an exploitative economic system, a spurious democratic political system, an unjust system of property rights, as well as the entire structure of settler-colonialism, patriarchy, and racism, my life has been determined by those things and by my privileged relationship to some of them. Some of us have the privilege of not having to confront these things right away, others are immediately faced with aspects of the world which need to be changed and which therefore require different ways of understanding and explaining them. Indigenous people do not have the luxury of ignoring race, for example; queer people do not have the luxury of avoiding homophobia. This is where critical theories come in. And this I think is where intersectionality is a useful tool to understand both identity *and* difference, individuality and relationality, freedom and necessity.

Métis writer Katherena Vermette’s novel *The Break*[21] is set where I grew up, in the North End of Winnipeg around Selkirk and McPhillips. She and I are also exactly the same age. But our ways of understanding and explaining the social, economic, and racial makeup of the North End are very different. Each of us sees a part of the whole picture. And individually our freedom is bounded by the necessity of those different experiences. Necessity is not, in this view, the opposite of freedom – as it must be under the three traditional laws of logic – but a component of it. Freedom and necessity are related in complex and constantly changing ways. It follows that, just as the individual of liberalism doesn’t really exist – every individual is produced by the social, economic, and cultural relationships into which they are born – so liberalism’s individual freedom does not exist either: freedom can only be freedom within our necessary relationships with other people. The Marxist cultural critic Christopher Caudwell sums up this perspective, addressing those progressives who hold to individual conceptions of freedom:

[20] Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse* (London: Pelican Books, 1973): 84.
[21] Vermette, Katherena. *The Break* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2016).

> Your conception of freedom, because it is rooted in a part of society, is also partial. All consciousness is determined by the society which produces it, but because you are ignorant of this mode of determination, you imagine your consciousness to be free and not determined by your experience and history. This illusion you exhibit so proudly is the badge of your [bondage] to yesterday, for if you could see those causes which determine your thought, you would be like us, on the road to freedom. The recognition of necessity in society is the only passage to social freedom.[22]

What kind of Intellectual Freedom would be possible if we understood freedom itself in this way? How could we change the capitalist, settler-colonial world if we weren't constantly bearing the weight of the onus of explanation? If we were to recognize that anything presented as natural, common-sense, realistic, neutral, or unmarked is not – as liberal theory and Jason Kenney would have it – uncommitted to any particular conception of the good, but simply pretending that the goods to which it owes its allegiance – private property, the market, racism, sexism, inequality – are either self-evident or mistakes, imperfections, solely the fault of a few bad apples.

The idea of structural determinations, of the necessary relations into which we are born, is the kind of interdependency that strikes fear into the hearts of those committed to an individualistic society where solidarity and collective action – society itself, really – is impossible. Intellectual Freedom would become, like all other kinds of freedom – and here I'm thinking specifically of anti-vaccination and anti-mask "freedom" – not an individual phenomenon at all, but a social one. It would require that we get over our liberal aversion to positive liberty and embrace the wellbeing and flourishing of human beings in all their radical difference. Neutrality and negative liberty cannot give us that; only positive liberty with a full acceptance of historical necessity can put us on

[22] Caudwell, Christopher. *Illusion and Reality: A Study in the Sources of Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1937): 287. The epigraph to the book is a quote from Engels' anti-Duhring: "Freedom is the recognition of necessity".

the road to a social and collective freedom in which, as the old book has it, the free development of each is a condition for the free development of all[23].

[23] Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Books, 1967): 105.

References

Alfino, Mark and Koltutsky, Laura (Eds.) *The Library Juice Press Handbook of Intellectual Freedom: Concepts, Cases, and Theories* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2014).

Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty." In *Liberty: Incorporating 'Four Essays on Liberty'*, 166-218 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Caudwell, Christopher. *Illusion and Reality: A Study in the Sources of Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1937).

Crenshawe, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, Issue 1, Article 8: 139-167.

Geuss, Raymond. *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Harvey, David. *Social Justice and the City* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan, With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1688* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools will never Dismantle the Master's House". In *Sister Outsider*, 110-113 (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984).

Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse* (London: Pelican Books, 1973).

Marx, Karl. "Theses on Feuerbach." In Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, 615-617 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976).

Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Books, 1967): 105.

Mochoruk, Jim and Kardash, Nancy. *The People's Co-Op: The Life and Times of a North End Institution* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. 2000).

Morrison, Toni. Portland State University, 1975.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to* Power (New York: Vintage Books, 1968.

Panitch, Leo. 2018. "The Radical Ferment of Winnipeg's Jewish Socialist Politics". *Reality Asserts Itself*, March 4, 2018.

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice, Revised Edition* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999).

Samek, Toni. *Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in American Librarianship, 1967-1974* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001).

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Harmarket, 2017).

Trilling, Daniel. "Why is the UK government suddenly targeting 'critical race theory'? *Guardian* October 23, 2020.

Trump, Donald. E.O. 13950 of Sep 22, 2020.

Vermette, Katherena. *The Break* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2016).

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001).

Woods, Mel. "Jason Kenney on Throne Speech: Intersectionality a 'Kooky Academic Theory'. *HuffPost* September 24, 2020.

Pathfinder
A Canadian Journal for Information Science
Students and Early Career Professionals

Challenges and LIS Responses to Digital Literacy in Crisis

Michelle Falk

[1]*School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, Email: mkfalk@ualberta.ca*

To Cite:

Falk, M. (2021). Challenges and LIS responses to digital literacy in crisis. [Special Issue]. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals, 2*(1), 27-33. https://doi/10.29173/pathfinder41

Abstract

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in the Spring of 2020, vulnerable Canadians were left behind by digital exclusion, which was exacerbated by an increased reliance on digital technologies. This paper will provide an overview of the links between digital inclusion, social justice, and the values of the LIS profession. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, another crisis of digital exclusion has revealed the ways in which digital citizenship and socio-economic exclusion are fundamentally intertwined. In response, many LIS professionals have overcome extensive closures and reductions in resources to find innovative solutions to this crisis of inequality. This paper will provide just a few examples of these responses from LIS organizations. Indeed, even among overwhelming barriers, LIS professionals have not lost sight of community values and commitment to social justice in challenging times. In unprecedented times, LIS professionals have found innovation to address ongoing social and economic barriers of digital exclusion.

Keywords: digital literacy, digital divide, COVID-19, human rights, social justice, digital inclusion

In compliance with emergency health orders and calls to ‘flatten the curve ’in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which shocked the globe in the Spring of 2020, there was an increased reliance on distance education, using online tools to facilitate community connections, and mass closures of public institutions. However, this upsurge in technological reliance has worsened the effects of the ‘digital divide ’on populations in remote and underserved areas (Stewart, 2020). Libraries have long

ISSN 2563-2493
DOI: 10.29173/pathfinder41

played a role in reducing barriers for vulnerable communities but how can the LIS community work to

provide support for equity-seeking populations left behind by social distancing? Here, this paper will unpack the implications of digital exclusion in perpetuating systemic socio-political barriers, especially in challenging times. In the Canadian context, this paper will begin to explore questions of digital literacy as tied to values of human rights and social justice. This paper concludes by outlining some ways that LIS organizations have found innovative solutions to help vulnerable communities affected by the digital divide in crisis.

Digital Exclusion in Crisis

Digital inclusion is often conceptualized in terms of physical access, but the *cost* of online communications and hardware is an often-overwhelming barrier. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, many experts warned that already disadvantaged communities are further cut off from widespread communication networks and socio-economic inclusion (Jaeger et al., 2015). According to data from Statistics Canada (2020) the 1.2% of Canadian households who have no access to the internet, are most commonly found in the lowest quartile of household income. These households are also more likely to use mobile devices such as cell phones to access the internet rather than a computer.

Digital access not only applies to the cost barrier of technology but also internet quality in rural and remote communities. In First Nations communities, only 30% of households have the recommended internet speed versus 86% of households Canada-wide (Stewart, 2020). Barriers such as these are commonly known as the ‘digital divide ’ as socio-economically disadvantaged communities are further without equitable access to technologies. These current circumstances are not unique or ‘unprecedented, ’as the pandemic has simply exaggerated reality for many individuals living with already few basic resources.

Digital Literacy and Social Justice

In 1995, Peter Gilster first defined *digital literacy* as the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when presented via

computers, and in being able to read with meaning and understand the content (Secker, 2018). Not to be confused with computer literacy, Secker (2018) writes, “Digital literacy recognized the internet as a medium that needed specific literacies to critique information that is provided, to separate truth from fiction and understand how hypertext and non-linear reading allows new meanings to be constructed” (p. 5).

Specifically, with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, Buchholz et al. (2020) argue that critical digital literacy and citizenship are participatory and intertwined. The pandemic has forced LIS professionals to reconsider what kind of citizenship is required for democratic participation in the “new normal”. Even in 2010, a US Federal Communications Commission on the Digital Divide states, “the social function of the Internet has changed dramatically in recent years… what was, until recently, a supplement to other channels of information and communication has become increasingly a basic requirement of social and economic inclusion” (cited in Bach et al., 2013, p. 249). Indeed, research demonstrates that digital exclusion intersects with social and economic exclusion and that socio-economic exclusion is further exacerbated by digital exclusion.

Accordingly, the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights draws a clear link between technology and equity, stating: “[Governments] should take all necessary steps to foster the independence of these new media and to ensure access of individuals thereto” (cited in Jaeger et al., 2015, p. 33). Full digital inclusion requires access to the internet to apply the skills of digital literacy. In addition, policymakers at all levels of government have called on libraries to foster civic engagement as an outcome for participants engaging in digital inclusion efforts. The Canadian Library Association’s policy on effective school library programs highlights access to quality and current information, stating: “All our young people must have the opportunity to develop the information and media literacy skills they require to reach their fullest potential, to become independent, life-long learners, and to live as active, responsible members of society” (cited in Fogarty, 2016, p. 73).

Clearly, this interconnectedness of LIS values, social inclusion and digital inclusion requires mindful approaches in the practice of social justice, and in translating these theories to practice (Dadlani, 2016). Principles of equality and distributive justice

are commonly invoked in descriptions of library services to the community with a sense of duty and public morality. As a result, many libraries have embraced a call to action in efforts to lessen the impact of digital exclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic for communities with limited resources. With full library closures due to emergency public health orders, most regular library services were cancelled and resources, such as free community internet access in public libraries, were no longer possible. Despite these challenges, many libraries have found innovative solutions to mitigate the widening digital divide.

Innovation for Digital Inclusion

Indeed, the most economically vulnerable populations served by public libraries in urban centers are also doubly vulnerable in suffering the worst health outcomes from COVID-19 (Ashworth, 2020). President of the Public Library Association, Ramiro Salazar states, “Shutting down libraries has a tremendous impact on the communities that we serve [...] Until they’re closed, sometimes folks don't realize how important libraries are to them” (Ashworth, 2020, para. 6).

Despite these closures, the Calgary Public Library (CPL), for example, has continued to offer an abundance of virtual events and recordings of talks and presentations (Calgary Public Library, 2021b). Specifically, in addressing the question of digital literacy, the public library system developed the Tech Mentors program. This program offers virtual support - through one-on-one meetings with a library volunteer - for patrons needing help navigating platforms like Zoom, familiarizing themselves with new software or devices, or getting access to library e-books or other online learning (Calgary Public Library, 2021c). For patrons without internet access, the CPL also offers a Library Hotline - a phone number for community members who need assistance in getting access to book holds, account information, or to connect with other programs such as Tech Mentors. In addition, the Borrow a Computer program lends community members a Chromebook for up to eight weeks, including basic user information and support (Calgary Public Library, 2021a).

School librarians have found similar solutions in addressing the digital divide for students with limited economic resources. In the first wave of the pandemic in Spring 2020, the Seven Oaks School Division in Winnipeg recognized students struggling with

access to technology adequate to fully engage with online learning and distributed Chromebooks to families in need (Hildebrandt, 2020).

While academic institutions across Canada decided in March 2020 to immediately move all on-campus instruction to an online platform, staff at McGill University Libraries found solutions to maintain student engagement. Including moving one-on-one appointments for reference and IT services to virtual platforms, as well as opening access to e-books and online journals; socially distanced study hubs were made available by appointment for students without adequate space or technology at home (McGill, 2020).

Conclusion

These are but a few examples of the efforts LIS professionals have made to continue services for vulnerable populations affected by growing digital exclusion. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a pressure test on existing systems and has forced a reconceptualization of solutions to already existing challenges. Because of the interconnectedness of values of human rights and social justice and the crucial role of digital literacy for democratic citizenship, LIS professionals can be mindful in meeting these challenges with a commitment to improving outcomes for socio-economically vulnerable populations. In unprecedented times, librarians and information professionals are well-equipped to find innovative solutions for the communities they serve.

References

Ashworth, B. (2020, March 25). Covid-19's impact on libraries goes beyond books. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/story/covid-19-libraries-impact-goes-beyond-books/

Bach, A., Shaffer, G., & Wolfson, T. (2013). Digital human capital: Developing a framework for understanding the economic impact of digital exclusion in low-income communities. *Journal of Information Policy, 3*, 247-266. http://doi.org/10.5325/jinfopoli.3.2013.0247

Buchholz, B. A., DeHart, J., & Moorman, G. (2020). Digital citizenship during a global pandemic: Moving beyond digital literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 64(1)*, 11-17. http://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1076

Calgary Public Library. (2021a). *Borrow a computer*. https://calgarylibrary.ca/your-library/free-services/computers-and-chromebooks/borrow-a-computer/

Calgary Public Library. (2021b). *Library updates on COVID-19*. https://calgarylibrary.ca/about-the-library/covid-19-updates/

Calgary Public Library. (2021c). *Events & programs*. https://calgarylibrary.ca/events-and-programs/programs/tech-mentors/

Dadlani, P. (2016). Social justice concepts and public libraries: A case study. In U. Gorham, N. Greene Taylor, & P. T. Jaeger (Eds.), *Perspectives on Libraries as Institutions of Human Rights and Social Justice* (pp. 15-48). Emerald Group Publishing. http://doi.org/10.1108/S0065-283020160000041002

Fogarty, V. (2016). Libraries and human rights - working together to reach our full potential. In U. Gorham, N. Greene Taylor, & P. T. Jaeger (Eds.), *Perspectives on Libraries as Institutions of Human Rights and Social Justice* (pp. 71-90). Emerald Group Publishing. http://doi.org/10.1108/S0065-283020160000041002

Hildebrandt, S. (2020, April 6). Creativity key for school divisions moving forward. *Winnipeg Free Press*. https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/our-communities/times/Creativity-key-for-school-divisions-moving-forward-569409281.html

Jaeger, P. T., Greene Taylor, N., & Gorham, U. (2015). *Libraries, human rights, and social justice: Enabling access and promoting inclusion*. Rowman & Littlefield.

McGill. (2020, August 28). *Coming soon! Study hubs at McGill*. https://www.mcgill.ca/library/channels/news/coming-soon-study-hubs-mcgill-324078

Secker, J. (2018). The trouble with terminology: Rehabilitating and rethinking 'digital literacy'. In K. Reedy & J. Parker (Eds.), *Digital Literacy Unpacked* (pp. 5-16). Facet Publishing.

Statistics Canada. (2020, April 15). *COVID-19 pandemic: School closures and the online preparedness of children*. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00001-eng.htm

Stewart, B. (2020, September 23). How COVID-19 worsens Canada's digital divide. *CBC News*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/covid-19-highlights-urban-rural-digital-divide-1.5734167

Pathfinder
A Canadian Journal for Information Science
Students and Early Career Professionals

Indigenous Knowledges and Scholarly Publishing: The Failure of Double-blind Peer Review

Geoffrey Boyd[1]

[1]*School of Library & Information Studies, University of Alberta, Email: gboyd@ualberta.ca*

To Cite: Boyd, G. (2021). Indigenous knowledges and scholarly publishing: The failure of the double-blind peer review. [Special Edition]. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals, 2*(1), 34-40. https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder44

Abstract

At its core, academic knowledge production is predicated on Western notions of knowledge historically grounded in a Euro-American, White, male worldview. As a component of academic knowledge production, scholarly publishing shares the same basis of Whiteness. It excludes knowledge that doesn't conform to White, Western notions of knowledge, forces conformity to (and therefore reinforcement of) a Western standard of writing/knowledge, and leads to a reverence of peer-reviewed literature as the only sound source of knowledge. As a tool of scholarly publishing and the editorial process, blind peer review, though perhaps well intentioned, is fraught with problems, especially for BIPOC researchers and writers. It fails in its intended purpose to drastically reduce or eliminate bias and racism in the peer review and editorial processes; shields peer reviewers and editors against accusations of bias, racism, or conflicts of interest; and robs BIPOC, and particularly Indigenous, writers and researchers from having the opportunity to develop relationships with those that are reviewing and publishing their work.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledges, Scholarly Publishing, Peer Review, Whiteness, Systemic Racism

At its core, academic knowledge production is predicated on Western notions of knowledge historically grounded in a Euro-American, White, male worldview. Such a system is necessarily exclusionary. As a result, bias against Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) and LGBTQ2+ researchers, women, and other minority groups is commonplace. The global hegemony of Whiteness in academic knowledge production forces scholars of colour and those that consume academic knowledge to frame themselves in the context of Whiteness and the Euro-American values, beliefs, and worldviews it presents. Academic knowledge production presents the White Euro-

ISSN 2563-2493
DOI: 10.29173/pathfinder44

American knowledge system as normal and the status quo, othering different ways of knowing, thereby furthering the underlying racial inequalities by reinforcing White standards of knowledge.

Just as academic knowledge is predicated in Whiteness, so, too, is the standard form of writing used in academia. The scholarly publishing system requires BIPOC scholars to "produce technical knowledge that conforms to Western standards of truth and validity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 6). For example, the scholarly publishing environment is fundamentally at odds with Indigenous Knowledges grounded in the Oral Tradition, and non-Indigenous peer-reviewers and editors overwhelmingly lack the cultural context to critique, let alone understand, them (Vowel, 2016). With this ignorance comes the likelihood of increased rejections of writing and research by Indigenous scholars due to not conforming to the research and writing standards of the Western knowledge-privileging scholarly publishing system. Markers often found in work by Indigenous writers (such as those stemming from writing tracing back to the Oral Tradition, or the practice of locating oneself in the writing) are almost impossible to blind, certainly without diluting or diminishing the intent of the work.

The general consensus on peer review seems to be that it is a time-honoured academic tradition. Double-blind peer review, in particular, is often touted as the gold standard of peer review. However, its history is one of contention. The system we are familiar with today did not come into existence until the 1960s and 70s. Since its inception there have been questions of the system's subjectivity and bias and alternatives like open peer review are gaining traction along with openness (open access publishing, open education resources, and open data) in education in general.

Within the binary of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed literature exists the assumption that scholarly peer-reviewed journals only produce trustworthy, correct, and good research, and the only source for such research is scholarly peer-reviewed journals (Vazire, 2020). This system privileges Western knowledge and means that BIPOC scholars, to be heard, are often "compelled to become complicit with White Euro-American hegemonic knowledge, further perpetuating the hegemony of White knowledge" (Kubota, 2019, p. 1). The reverence of peer-reviewed research along with the binary of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed research means writing and

knowledge not passed through the scholarly publishing environment is less valued and presented as less important. Research and writing that doesn't conform to Western standards of knowledge and writing, therefore, are not accepted for peer-reviewed publication, and are then viewed as poor or bad research. All together, this produces a cycle of Whiteness in academic knowledge production, writing, and publishing that

1. excludes knowledge or research that doesn't conform to White, Western notions of knowledge, like Traditional Indigenous Knowledges or other research by BIPOC scholars;
2. forces conformity to, and therefore reinforcement of, a Western standard of writing/knowledge; and
3. leads to a reverence of peer-reviewed literature as the only sound source of knowledge.

Double-blind peer review is often praised for its ability to combat editor and peer-reviewer bias by blinding (or hiding) author and peer-reviewer identities, thus hypothetically allowing BIPOC scholars, women, and other excluded minority groups to participate in the scholarly publishing process on equal footing to those privileged by the system. Unfortunately, double-blind peer review does little to combat the systemic racism inherent in the scholarly publishing environment. As a tool of scholarly publishing and the editorial process, blind peer review, though perhaps well intentioned, is fraught with problems, especially for BIPOC researchers and writers.

Despite being hailed as a panacea against prejudice, double-blind peer review does not unequivocally eliminate implicit bias. According to data from 2014 to 2016, the double-blind grant application process of the National Institutes of Health disadvantaged Black applicants, whose award probability was just 55% of that found for White applicants (Erosheva et al., 2020, p. 1). There is no question that there are numerous contributing factors to this discrepancy, but it belies the claim that simply blinding the name of an author eliminates bias. Racial bias also intersects with gender bias in the academic knowledge production and publishing field, even in blinded peer review. In a 2013 analysis of 8 million papers, West et al. (2013) noted that gender bias and discrimination remain at some level across many disciplines and fields of study. Perhaps unsurprising given the gender gap in published work, the study also highlighted

gender bias in the peer-review process. For example, papers of equal quality are more likely to be accepted for review and publication if men occupy the prestigious author positions (such as first author) rather than women. Another study was unable to conclude that double-blind peer review had any positive effect on female representation in scholarly authorship (Engqvist & Frommen, 2008).

Indeed, blinding doesn't just protect against accusations and retribution, "it protects the vindictive, by concealing evidence of critical explanatory events and by hiding track records of bad behaviour" (Bastian, 2017). This is not a new phenomenon. As early as 1845, referees were described as "full of envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness...using the cover of anonymity to advance their personal interests" (Csiszar, 2016, p. 308). For BIPOC scholars contributing within the confines of the systemic racism of academic publishing, the bias can be worse than vindictiveness. Conflicts of interest, explicit racism, and other forms of prejudice can remain undetected, protected by the double-blinding process that offers no accountability for reviewer's comments kept out of the public eye.

Euro-American knowledge grounded in Whiteness is, at its core, individualistic and gives rise to the 'publish or perish' axiom of academia, which places it in stark contrast to the Indigenous methodology of working from the basis of relationships, a key element of all aspects of life, which applies to writing and publishing Indigenous Knowledges in academia (Akiwenzie-Damm et al., 2017). Such a system of relationships, collaboration, and community-minded interactions based on trust and honesty is antithetical to double-blind peer review, because the blinding process actively aims to eliminate it. However, such a methodology is necessary in scholarly publishing when reviewing authentic Indigenous Stories or Knowledges, because non-Indigenous publishers and journals with non-Indigenous editors and peer-reviewers don't understand Indigenous Cultural Protocols, literary traditions, Indigenized forms and genres, Indigenized forms of English, and the ongoing and intergenerational trauma from the colonization process (Akiwenzie-Damm, 2016; Unreserved, 2018). This lack of understanding has severe historical and present-day implications: "Indigenous voices have been and continue to be ignored, suppressed, misrepresented, whitewashed, or stolen by settler publishers who don't understand the protocols" (Taylor, 2020, p. 226).

Altogether, the effects of double-blind peer review and the publishing system in general, rife with systemic racism, present a single narrative privileging Western knowledge and research. The problems of bias and prejudice within scholarly publishing are not exclusive to double-blind peer review, but that particular system does have negative implications for BIPOC writers, scholars, and researchers. Failing in its primary goal of concealing the identity (or identifiable characteristics) of scholars, paired with its shielding of anonymous peer reviewers from consequences for reviewing with bias, prejudice, or conflict of interest, double-blind peer review is a broken system. The reverence of peer-reviewed research along with the binary of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed research means writing and knowledge not passed through the scholarly publishing environment is less valued and presented as less important. Reimagining peer review in scholarly publishing, the supposed gold standard in academic publishing, to include an emphasis on relationship building between Indigenous scholar, editor, and peer reviewers allows Indigenous Peoples to present information about themselves and ensure it is published in a culturally appropriate and accurate way, something that double-blind peer review simply does not allow. Developing relationships allows editors and peer reviewers to build knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures (and in particular that of the writer), learn from Indigenous scholars, and thus begin to review with sensitivity, and allows Indigenous scholars to “ensure that Indigenous material is expressed with the highest possible level of cultural authenticity, and in a manner that follows Indigenous Protocols and maintains Indigenous cultural integrity” (Younging, 2018, p. 38). By following Indigenous Protocols and developing relationships based on trust with Indigenous scholars, editors and peer reviewers can begin to challenge the Cycle of Whiteness in scholarly publishing.

References

Akiwenzie-Damm, K. (2016). “We think differently. We have a different understanding”: Editing Indigenous texts as an Indigenous editor. In D. J. Irvine, & S. Kamboureli (Eds.), *Editing as cultural practice* (pp. 29–40). Wilfred Laurier University Press.

Akiwenzie-Damm, K., Dunning, N., Halfe, L., & Ogg, A. (2017, June 8–June 10). *Roundtable with authors and editors on editing Indigenous writing* [Conference session]. Writing Stick Conference, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/9z903031p

Bastian, H. (2017, October 31). The fractured logic of blinded peer review in journals. *PLOS Blogs: Absolutely Maybe*. https://absolutelymaybe.plos.org/2017/10/31/the-fractured-logic-of-blinded-peer-review-in-journals/

Csiszar, A. (2016). Peer review: Troubled from the start. *Nature, 532*(7599), 306–308. https://doi.org/10.1038/532306a

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2008). Introduction: Critical methodologies and Indigenous inquiry. In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, & L. T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (pp. 1–19). SAGE. https://doi.org/9781483385686.n1

Engqvist, L., & Frommen, J. G. (2008). Double-blind peer review and gender publication bias. *Animal Behaviour*, *76,* e1–e2. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2008.05.023

Erosheva, E. A., Grant, S., Chen, M., Lindner, M. D., Nakamura, R. K., & Lee, C. J. (2020). NIH peer review: Criterion scores completely account for racial disparities in overall impact scores. *Science Advances, 6*(23), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aaz4868

Kubota, R. (2019). Confronting epistemological racism, decolonizing scholarly knowledge: Race and gender in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, *41*(5), 712–732. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amz033

Taylor, R. (2020). Gathering knowledges to inform best practices in Indigenous publishing. *ariel: A Review of International English Literature, 51*(2–3), 205–232. https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2020.0015

Unreserved. (2018, March 16). *Elements of Indigenous style: Author shares 5 common mistakes editors make* [Radio broadcast]. CBC. https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1187678275965

Vazire, S. (2020, June 25). Peer-reviewed scientific journals don't really do their job. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/story/peer-reviewed-scientific-journals-dont-really-do-their-job/

Vowel, C. (2016). *Indigenous writes: A guide to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit issues in Canada*. HighWater Press.

West, J. D., Jacquet, J., King, M. M., Correll, S. J., & Bergstrom, C. T. (2013). The role of gender in scholarly authorship. *PLOS ONE, 8*(7): e66212. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0066212

Younging, G. (2018). *Elements of Indigenous style: a guide for writing by and about Indigenous Peoples*. Brush Education.

Pathfinder
A Canadian Journal for Information Science
Students and Early Career Professionals

The Value of a Book: Beyond the Price

Shannen Shott

[1]*School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, sshott@ualberta.ca*

To Cite:

Shott, S. (2021). The value of a book: Beyond the price. [Special Issue]. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, *2*(1), 41-51. https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder43

Abstract

This research comments on the historical and current trends of special collection libraries and the ways in which their collection policies reflect priorities of protecting certain voices over others, thus assigning a value to those books which are sought after. While book value has been discussed extensively, most of the literature has not taken into account the significance of collection policies, which is a gap that my research aims to address. The methodology includes a literature review of the different ways in which book value is determined and an examination of the collection policy documents of twenty North American special collection libraries. This examination, accomplished via coded data analysis, will determine how these documents reflect the historical and current priorities of special collections and how they subsequently assign value to books. The results of this analysis indicate a consistent commitment to acquiring materials that build on existing collection strengths, as well as a prioritization of locality as it relates to potential additions. Furthermore, the limited inclusion for marginalized communities in collection policies suggests a need to discuss the future direction of documentation as it relates to recognizing the value of marginalized voices.

Keywords: Special collections, collection policy development, value

Special collections libraries, which serve to make old and rare books available under conditions that protect and preserve the materials, serve a distinct role in defining which books are valuable. The value of a book signifies more than the price, and my research explores the different ways a book is valued and under what circumstances, particularly in the context of special collections. This paper aims to answer the following questions:

ISSN 2563-2493
DOI: 10.29173/pathfinder43

- What do the collection policies of special collections libraries suggest about how they assign value to books?
- What do these collection policies suggest about current and growing trends in special collections development?

While book value has been discussed extensively in terms of pricing and its research value, this paper aims to address the gap regarding policies in this discussion. Collection policies play a powerful role in reflecting the priorities of the special collection, specifying what it aims to acquire and formally recognizing the value of that material. This research was conducted via coded data analysis of collection policies from twenty North American special collections. The results of this analysis indicate a consistent commitment to acquiring materials that build on existing collection strengths, as well as a prioritization of locality. This paper will also discuss concerns regarding marginalized voices in special collections and the limited inclusion of marginalized communities in policies.

Literature Review

The literature that addresses book value indicate three main types: monetary, sentimental, and research. Monetary value primarily refers to the price of a book, often in the context of the book market. Brunet and Shiflett (1992) have designated desirability, scarcity, condition as the three factors in determining the price of a book. In response to the popular notion that the age of a book directly correlates to its price in the book trade, Dyal (1995) asserts that age is hardly the only factor, or even an important one. According to Dyal, the most important factor is demand, followed by condition and completeness. As this paper will demonstrate, the nuances behind book value are subjective to the contexts of the books in question and their relationship with historical or contemporary environments.

The driving force behind sentimental value is the relationship between a book and a person or group of people. According to Brunet and Shiflett (1992), “People want to believe with an almost religious faith that books are valuable” (p. 87). They refer to the people who are convinced that their old books can be converted into some monetary value. Brunet and Shiflett suggest that librarians have yet to fully legitimize the needs of “those who want to know how much their grandfather’s books are worth”

(p. 86). In the interest of working to legitimize those needs, this paper supports the sentimental value that many old books carry.

Research value refers to the intellectual value that a book provides as it relates to the research objectives of an institution or the wider scholarly community. Scott (2010) criticizes the strategy of 'collecting to strength', which has been adopted by many special collections. By collecting to strength, libraries were valuing research over teaching, garnering international interest, and vying to be the envy of rival collections (Scott, 2010). Although the strategy has its merits, such as bolstering support for particular research areas, Scott calls attention to four gambles: (1) that the materials will remain affordable over time; (2) that the strength is unique; (3) that the collection will continue to offer fresh research potential; (4) and that the collection area will be a worthy long-term investment for future generations.

Underlying nearly every discussion about collection management is the matter of what material is being pushed to the margins. Galbraith (2014) encourages libraries to take the risk in exploring these margins and discover which materials are being ignored "but may have value further down the road and thus deserve to be preserved" (p. 331). In particular, special collections are in a unique position to preserve materials for future generations; Galbraith makes the point that the materials that are pushed aside "are ephemeral and in danger of being lost" (p. 331). For this reason, this paper will be considering which material is excluded from recognition in collection policies. According to Hawley (2016), "Objects have meaning when they are used, not merely because of the continuity of their existence" (p. 8). Hawley goes on to argue that books therefore can be seen as meaningless if there is no level of interaction wherein the book is used and shared, building new memories into the object.

Methods

The design of this research project's data collection is centered around an analysis of collection policies. Collection policies were gathered from the websites of twenty North American special collection libraries. These policies were then coded for the categories of 'active acquisition', which include any materials specified as being currently sought out by the library to add to their collection, and 'collection strengths', which include any areas of that were specified by the policy as a strength in the

collection. The results of this coding for each individual policy were compared in order to locate patterns across the different libraries. These patterns were then cross-referenced with existing literature about book value and special collections in order to determine how the current patterns matched with previous trends.

Results

Figure 1

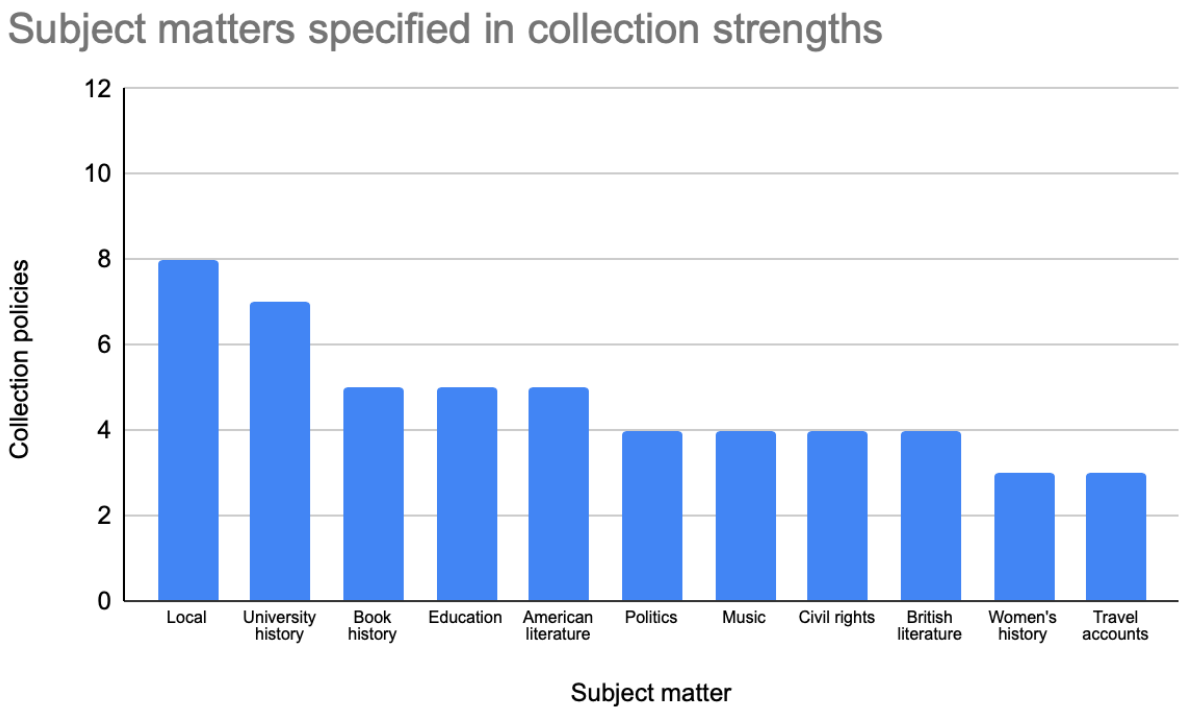


Figure 2

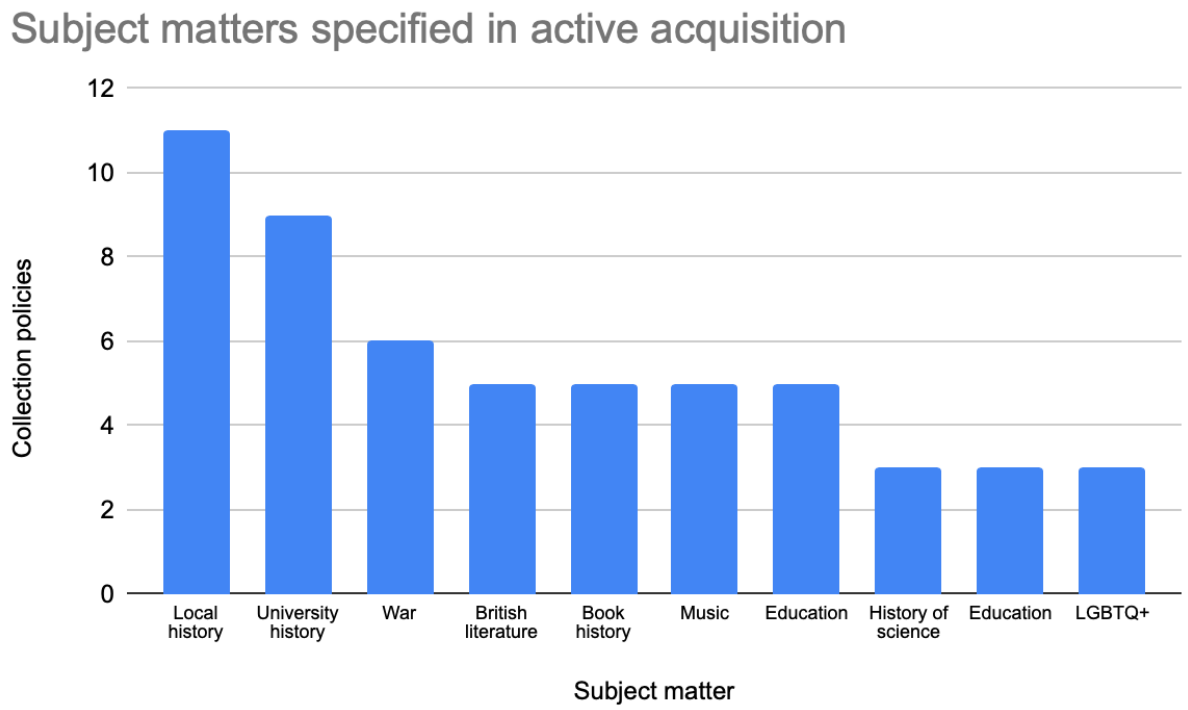
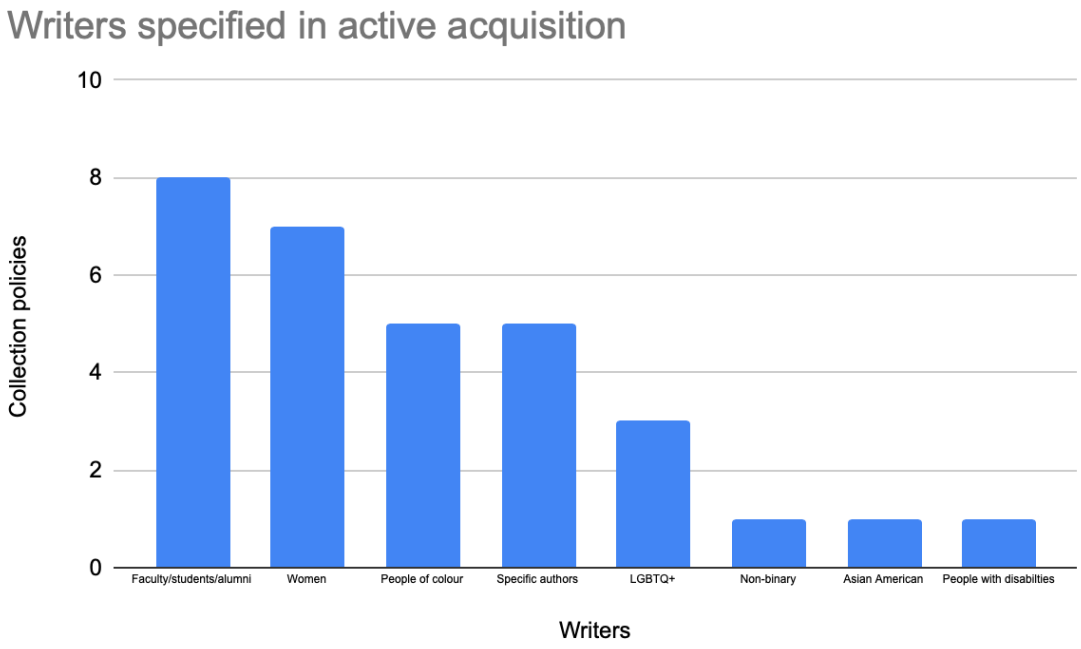


Figure 3



Discussion

Many of the collection policies list unique materials in both active acquisition and collection strengths, related to their institution's history, geography, and donor collections. Such unique materials include subjects such as missionary activities, history of psychoactive substances research, insect eradication, cartography, and many more. Therefore, patterns of repeated subject matters are notable because they represent a common thread across the distinct natures of the twenty special collections analyzed for this research project.

The most frequently specified subject matter in the collection policies is local history, followed closely by university history. In most rare book collections, a large portion of the material will address the local history, giving it a high research value in terms of locality (Potter & Holley, 2010). This suggests that another type of book value might be that of local value. Considering the established importance of local and university history, it is not surprising to find that the most frequently specified group of writers in active acquisition is that of faculty, students, and alumni. The popularity of women and people of colour is an interesting trend in light of Scott's (2010) article, where he noticed the growing emphasis in "some areas of African-American studies and women's and gender studies" as a push by younger faculty to get library support for their areas of interest during the twentieth century (p. 51).

The categories of "non-binary," "Asian American," and "people with disabilities" were included in Figure 3 because they all originated from a single collection policy. As such, these categories stood out against the backdrop of more vague generalizations around inclusion. The inclusion of specific marginalized communities is far more powerful than generalized statements about supporting diversity in recognizing the value of those communities and the library's commitment to collecting their materials. Acknowledgement of these communities within the official documentation of a collection policy opens the door to the communities garnering recognition not only within special collections, but in the wider academic institutional space as well (Hawley, 2016).

Of the twenty collection policies, nine specified that they were collecting to strength, seven did not specify that they were collecting to strength, and four policies implied, but did not specifically acknowledge, that they were collecting to strength.

Although the strategy has been argued to be outdated and risky (Scott, 2010), collecting to strength is still very much a current and ongoing strategy of choice in special collections.

Conclusion

The findings of this research reveal that the strategy of collecting to strength is still a prominent approach to collection development in special collections. The evidence that collecting to strength is an ongoing trend suggests that the value of a book in special collections lies in its relationship to the existing collection. The frequency of local history and campus history in the data coding establishes locality as a fourth type of book value. The specified identities of non-binary, Asian Americans, and people with disabilities in one of the collection policies demonstrates the potential that these policies have for recognizing the value of marginalized communities. By listing specific marginalized groups in their policy, a library demonstrates their shift away from colonial and canonical works towards the goal of a more inclusive collection.

The results of this study could be expanded by increasing the data size and examining more collection policies from North American special collection libraries, as well as speaking directly to the librarians to gather more context for the policies. Further studies could be conducted around analyzing what material is in special collections and how collection strengths are being defined in collection development policies. There remains a wealth of research to be done on the topic of special collections and their collection development, which will expand our understanding of where special collections stand today and what their direction is for the future.

References

Brunet, P.J., & Shiflett, L. (1992). Out-of-print and antiquarian books: Guides for reference librarians. RQ, 32(1), 85-100. DOI: 10.2307/25829197

Dyal, D.H. (1985). What old books are worth: When price, not preservation, is paramount, it's best to set 'em straight. American Libraries, 16(11), 774-6. https://login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edscal&AN=edscal.8569442&site=eds-live&scope=site

Galbraith, S.K. (2014). Thinking about collection development in special collections. In B. Albitz, C. Avery, & D. Zabel (Eds.), *Rethinking collection development and management* (pp. 323-33). Libraries Unlimited.

Hawley, E.H. (2016). Reflections on the meaning of objects. In A. Hirshon, R.H. Jackson & M.A. Hubbard (Eds.), *Forging the future of special collections* (pp. 3-10). Neal Schuman.

Potter, S. & Holley, P. (2010). Rare materials in academic libraries. Collection Building, 29(4), 148-153. DOI: 10.1108/01604951011088880

Scott, P. (2010). Focus versus breadth in special collections acquisitions. Against the Grain, 22(2), 50-3. DOI: 10.7771/2380-176X.5508

Collection Policies

Amherst College. (n.d.). Archives & special collections collection development policy. https://www.amherst.edu/library/archives/collectiondevelopment

George Washington University. (n.d.). Collection development policy: Education. https://library.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/scrc/Education_collection_development_policy.pdf

George Washington University. (n.d.). Collection development policy: Kiev Judaica. https://library.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/scrc/Kiev_collection_development_policy.pdf

George Washington University. (n.d.). Collection development policy: Labor. https://library.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/scrc/Labor_collection_development_policy.pdf

George Washington University. (n.d.). Collection development policy: Washingtoniana. https://library.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/scrc/Washingtoniana_collection_development_policy2016.pdf

James Madison University. (n.d.). Special collections - Collection development policy. https://www.lib.jmu.edu/policies/special-collection-development/

NYU Libraries. (n.d.). Special collections: Collection development policy. https://guides.nyu.edu/speccol/coll-dev-policy

Purdue University Libraries. (n.d.). Virginia Kelly Karnes archives and special collections research center - Collection development policy. https://www.lib.purdue.edu/sites/default/files/spcol/archives_collection_development_policy.pdf

Smith College Libraries. (n.d.). Collection development strategy. https://libraries.smith.edu/special-collections/about/collection-development-strategy

United States Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). Collection development policy. https://specialcollections.nal.usda.gov/collection-development-policy

University of Alberta. (n.d.). Bruce Peel special collections library - collection policy. https://www2.library.ualberta.ca/2015assets/about/BPSCcollectionpolicy.pdf

University of Arizona Libraries. (n.d.). Collection development policy. http://speccoll.library.arizona.edu/collection-development-policy

University of Arkansas Libraries. (n.d.). Collection development policy. https://libraries.uark.edu/specialcollections/about/collection-development-policy.pdf

University of British Columbia. (n.d.). General guidelines for collecting and list of major collections: Print and archival. https://rbsc.library.ubc.ca/files/2013/07/acquisitionspolicypublicweb1.pdf

University of Denver. (n.d.). Special collections and archives collection development policy. https://library.du.edu/collections-archives/specialcollections/collection-development-policy.html

University of Georgia. (n.d.). Hargrett rare book and manuscript library - Collection development policy. http://www5.galib.uga.edu/scl/about/hargrett%20collection%20development%20policy.pdf

University of Louisville. (n.d.). Collection policies. https://library.louisville.edu/archives/collection-policies

University of North Texas. (n.d.). Special collections collection development policy. https://library.unt.edu/policies/special-collections-collection-development/

University of Pennsylvania. (n.d.). Special collections: printed books collection development policy. https://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/policies/special-collections-printed-books

University of Pennsylvania. (n.d.). Special collections: manuscripts collection development policy. https://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/policies/special-collections-manuscripts

University of Regina. (n.d.). Special collections collection policy. https://uregina.libguides.com/c.php?g=606183&p=4202172

University of Southern California. (n.d.). Rare books collection development policy. https://libraries.usc.edu/sites/default/files/rare-books-collection-development-20190520.docx_.pdf

University of Virginia Library. (n.d.). Collection development policy. https://small.library.virginia.edu/collections/collection-development-policy/

Vanderbilt University. (n.d.). Collection development policy. https://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/specialcollections/policies/collectiondevelopment.php

Pathfinder
A Canadian Journal for Information Science
Students and Early Career Professionals

FiP
FORUM FOR INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

Support Local: Public Libraries and Local Authors

Rynnelle Wiebe[1]

[1]*School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, Email: rynnelle@ualberta.ca*

To Cite:

Wiebe, R. (2021). Support local: Public libraries and local authors. [Special Issue]. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals, 2*(1), 52-58. https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder40

Abstract

In 2020 we have experienced movements to support local creators, restaurants, and businesses; how can the library community support local authors? This extended abstract discusses research about how public libraries support local authors, with a focus on how these works are included in library collections and made findable to community members. Twelve public libraries from British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan were selected for analysis of collection policies and item metadata. Qualitative content analysis is used to code collection policies, and systemic analysis of item metadata is used to understand methods of identifying locally-authored items. The results of this research indicate that collection policies provide both opportunities and barriers for including locally-authored items and there is a lack of consistent methods for identifying items as locally-authored within item metadata. Some of these barriers can be attributed to the challenge of identifying and defining “local authorship”. This extended abstract concludes with recommendations for how libraries can modify collection policies and methods of identifying items as locally-authored in order to support local authors and make these items more accessible to the community.

Keywords: public libraries; local authors; collection policies; metadata;

Public libraries serve their communities. By supporting local authors, public libraries demonstrate a commitment to the community and the perspectives and concerns of library users. Public libraries can support local authors in various ways including author talks and book signings, creating library displays of locally-authored items, and hosting writing and publishing workshops. This extended abstract discusses the results of a research project that focused on how libraries can support local authors

ISSN 2563-2493
DOI: 10.29173/pathfinder40

through including these items in library collections and making them available and findable for community members.

Benefits of Supporting Local Authors

Including locally-authored items in public library collections provides benefits for the library, the community, and the authors. Books created by local authors are likely relevant to local issues and perspectives, the community and its history (Bijali & Kahn, 2018), contributing to a sense of community identity and a culture of reading. Local authors benefit from sharing their stories with the community. This is important; a survey of self-publishing authors at Woodneath Library found that 80% of authors write because they have a story they believe "deserves to be told" (Sandy, 2016, p. 901). Including locally-authored items in libraries also provides authors with opportunities to gain exposure and growth as an author (DeWild & Jarema, 2015).

Literature Review

Research on the relationship between local authors and public libraries is scarce. One reason for this could be, as England (1948) discussed, defining "local" and "local authors" is difficult. Some libraries focus on birthplace or where an author lived or was educated, others focus on the subject of the work, and others interpret this as local history collections. It is also important to consider that many local authors may choose to self-publish, which presents additional challenges for including these items in library collections. Conventional publishing conglomerates prioritize profits and seek only what they believe to be guaranteed bestsellers (Dilevko & Dali, 2006). This often prevents new authors or authors whose stories may resonate with niche audiences from publishing through conventional methods. Unfortunately, self-published books are often associated with lower quality (DeWild & Jarema, 2015; Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Mullock, 2019). These authors do not have access to the teams of editors, proofreaders, publishers, and marketers that ensure a level of quality in conventional publishing.

There are also various challenges when it comes to acquiring self-published books and cataloguing them, because self-published books are often not included in vendor lists or review journals (DeWild & Jarema, 2015; Holley, 2015). This means that librarians are less likely to be aware of these items. It also means that librarians must do original cataloguing, requiring additional library time and resources to complete (Tuncer

& David, 2019). The lack of publishing information available to cataloguers results in a lack of bibliographic control of self-published items (Bradley et al., 2012; Holley, 2015), and libraries may be reluctant to add these to their collections. Because many local authors choose to self-publish, these concerns are relevant to this research; however, there remains a lack of research about locally-authored items specifically, which this research aims to address.

Methods

This research included both qualitative analysis of collection policies and systematic analysis of metadata content to determine how locally-authored items are included in library collections and how these items are identified. Twelve urban public libraries were included in this research, four each from British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Three provinces were selected for research based on the author's location and the limited scope and timeline for the project. Each library's collection policy was analyzed using open coding to identify themes present in selection criteria. Local authors were selected using a Google search based on a broad definition of "local" that includes the author's birthplace or having lived or worked in the city. If authors from outside of the city were identified as "local" on community websites, they were also included. Each author was searched for in the corresponding library catalogue. Up to three items from each author were selected for systematic analysis, resulting in a total of seventy-eight locally-authored items.

Collection Policies

The analysis of collection policies demonstrated seven major themes relating to selecting items by local authors. The first three, *community-oriented collections*, *collection diversity*, and *local interest*, present opportunities for including these items in public library collections. *Community-oriented collections* was a theme present in all twelve policies. Libraries describe their collections as meeting the needs and interests of their community, including information, recreation, education, culture, artistic, and leisure needs. This is closely connected to *collection diversity*. All twelve libraries describe the importance of developing diverse collections that meet diverse community needs. This was described within the policies as including various views and subjects, balanced collections, and including items that share all sides of an issue. Only six

policies identified *local interest* in their collection policies. This theme is categorized using a broad definition of “local”, as it includes policies that reference items from the region, province, or even Canadian authors and content.

These themes present opportunities for libraries to include locally-authored items. Locally-authored books are written by community members and are likely to represent the perspectives and experiences of their community. They are also likely to contribute to the diversity of the collection and add unique points of view, especially if the items are self-published. *Local interest* also provides clear opportunities for including locally-authored content; however, it is important to recognize that only half of the policies include this consideration and the definition of “local” is either broad or not clearly defined.

The analysis of collection policies also demonstrates that these policies may prevent the inclusion of locally-authored items. Eight policies include *quality* of the physical format and writing as important when considering items for acquisition, and seven policies select items based on the *value* of the item. Additionally, nine collection policies select items based on *reviews*. This often refers to reviews in publications, though some policies also include the professional judgement of the librarian or even public opinion. Similarly, the *reputation of the creator* is a factor for consideration in half of the policies.

When libraries depend on this selection criteria, it poses barriers for including locally-authored and self-published items. As discussed above, authors who choose to self-publish do not have the same resources that ensure quality, and their works often have a reputation for lower quality. It is also rare that self-published books will have unpaid reviews in publications, and if the local author is new they may not have established a reputation for themselves as an author. These books are unlikely to meet this selection criteria and may be excluded from library collections.

Metadata

When locally-authored items are included in library collections, it is important that metadata is used to enable library users to find and access these items. Using the sample of seventy-eight locally-authored items, thirty-eight items contained metadata that identified the item as locally-authored, some using multiple methods. Nineteen

items used Subject Headings, Genre/Form, or Local Subject Headings fields (MARC 650, 655, 690) to identify the items as locally-authored. This includes reference to either the city, region, or province where the author or genre is from (e.g. “Saskatchewan author” or “Saskatchewan fiction”). MARC Notes are also used in six items. These notes either use the phrase “local author” or state the location where the author is from. Additionally, twenty-one items are either located in local collections identified by the call number, or included in online lists identifying the city, region, or province. Clearly, the methods differ among items. Even within libraries, locally-authored items are identified in various ways. This lack of uniform methods makes it difficult for community members to find and access these local works.

Recommendations

The lack of cohesive methods for including and identifying locally-authored items in urban public libraries indicates that there is work to be done around supporting local authors. There are numerous challenges to doing this, including defining “local”. Even when this is defined, authors are not static entities that easily fit into MARC fields. It is unrealistic for MARC records to reflect this changing status. Additionally, many libraries are part of consortiums that share online catalogues so the term “local” loses its meaning when an item is accessed by various communities. To address this challenge, further research can be done into cataloguing standards for identifying local and self-published authors in item metadata, and developing best practices for using online lists that can be updated frequently and labelled for easy accessibility.

Libraries must also address the barriers in collection policies. Instead of relying on unpaid reviews, libraries can expand their sources for selecting items for acquisition to include social media tools (Pacer, 2013) or develop a volunteer review board (Mullock, 2019). Additionally, libraries can modify their policies to include local interest or make exceptions for locally-authored items.

Conclusion

The lack of cohesive methods for including and identifying locally-authored items in urban public libraries indicates that there is work to be done around supporting local authors. Modifying collection policies and developing best practices for including and

identifying items by local authors will provide libraries with methods for continuing to support their communities.

References

Bijali, A., & Khan, S. C. (2018). Marketing of local history collection of public libraries in the age of IT. *International Journal of Information Dissemination and Technology, 8*(2), 96-98. https://doi.org/10.5958/2249-5576.2018.00020.1

Bradley, J., Fulton, B., & Helm, M. (2012). Self-published books: An empirical "snapshot". *Library Quarterly, 82*(2), 107-140. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/664576

Dawson, L. (2008). The role of self-publishing in libraries. *Library Trends, 57*(1), 43-51. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.0.0021

DeWild, M., & Jarema, M. (2015). Supporting self-publishing and local authors: From challenge to opportunity. In Holley, R. P. (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries* (pp. 21-26). Purdue University Press. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ualberta/detail.action?docID=4743133

Dilevko, J., & Dali, K. (2006). The self-publishing phenomenon and libraries. *Library & Information Science Research, 28*, 208-234. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2006.03.003

England, G. A. (1948). Local author collections in libraries. *College and Outreach Libraries, 9*, 339-342. https://doi-org.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/10.5860/crl_09_04_339

Holley, R. P. (2015). Self-publishing and bibliographic control. In Holley, R. P. (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries* (pp. 21-26). Purdue University Press. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ualberta/detail.action?docID=4743133

Mullock, H. (2019). Self-published memoirs in libraries: Challenges, opportunities, and recommendations. *iJournal, 4*(2), 39-50. https://theijournal.ca/index.php/ijournal/article/view/32547

Pacer, M. (2013). Small press and self-published books: A collection development dilemma. *Against the Grain, 25*(3), 33-34. https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6521

Sandy, H. M. (2016). The role of public libraries in self-publishing: Investigating author and librarian perspectives. *Journal of Library Administration, 56*(8), 893-912. https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2015.1130541

Tuncer, N., & David, R. (2019). The cataloging of self-published items. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly, 57*(4), 206-226. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2019.1602091