Two decades of critical information literacy: a review and analysis of the literature

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Abstract

Introduction. Critical information literacy (CIL) has been explored, refined, debated and critiqued since its first appearances in the literature twenty years ago. CIL uses teaching and learning settings in libraries to understand and act upon oppression in information systems. What does the literature tell us about the direction of CIL and critical librarianship more broadly, and what is absent from the existing scholarship?

Method. This research explores CIL's recent past through a literature review and analysis of 97 publications from 2016-2024. The review is international in scope.

Results. The literature review finds common thematic concerns in the areas of Conceptualising and theorising, Responding to contemporary politics and technologies, and Critiquing critical information literacy. Additionally, several issues and failings of CIL were identified, including a lack of attention to race and labour and the overrepresentation of perspectives based in higher education and western-centric knowledge systems.

Conclusions. The author suggests that to move towards its liberatory aims, the burgeoning field of CIL should continue drawing upon other relevant movements and contemporary theories, establish localised analyses of power and be considered as a dynamic and context-dependent concept rooted in sociopolitical realities.

Introduction

Critical information literacy (CIL) seeks to understand and act upon how libraries and other information systems both contribute to and can oppose systemic oppressions such as racism, sexism, colonialism and ableism. CIL has taken on new roles and an increased sense of urgency in response to global concerns such as disinformation and authoritarian leaders, and continues to generate ideas that encourage library workers to seek to democratise knowledge and access to information. This paper seeks to answer the questions: 1) What themes are present in the current CIL literature? and; 2) Based on the current CIL literature, what areas and perspectives are lacking or underrepresented? Moreover, this paper will also consider the functions of the absences and erasures in the literature and what potential next steps for CIL could include.

Drabinski and Tewell define critical information literacy as, '*a theory and practice that considers the sociopolitical dimensions of information and production of knowledge, and critiques the ways in which systems of power shape the creation, distribution, and reception of information*' (2019, p. 1). Twenty years after CIL's initial appearances in the literature it has been the subject of many works theorising, applying and critiquing it. Interest in CIL continues to expand and flourish, and it has contributed to challenging entrenched ideas in libraries and information literacy. The literature has seen a considerable increase in researchers applying CIL to specific settings and specialities, providing useful nuance and insight. Despite its advances, CIL has remained limited in consequential ways. CIL's inattention to race and white supremacy is one major issue, along with other concerns voiced in the literature such as a lack of recognising labour and working conditions as a fundamental aspect of teaching in libraries, a western-centric representation and interest in CIL, and a focus on and within higher education that limits CIL's broader potential. First, a brief look at CIL's foundational years will provide useful context.

Critical information literacy: foundations, early 2000s-2015

Critical information literacy has accumulated a considerable presence in the library and information science literature and at conferences, especially in North America. As such, the literature and particularly early works in CIL are North America-centric. Foundations of the critical information literacy literature include articles by Kapitzke (2003), Swanson (2004), Elmborg (2006), and Jacobs (2008), all of whom argue for the importance of an information literacy theory and practice which accounts for political and ethical issues. Kapitzke applies poststructuralism to critique the concept of information literacy, while Swanson, Elmborg and Jacobs draw upon critical literacy theory and composition studies to consider the roles of teaching librarians. Critical theory as well as composition studies continue to be used to analyse information literacy and the educational work of libraries, but as early as the cornerstone volume *Critical library instruction: theories and methods* edited by Accardi and colleagues (2010), inspiration for reimagining information literacy has taken many forms that included queer, feminist and critical race pedagogies. Extending the conversation on information literacy's political possibilities, Higgins and Gregory's edited volume *Information literacy and social justice: radical professional praxis* (2013) took further inspiration from Paulo Freire and the field of critical pedagogy.

A major step in practical applications of critical information literacy came with the publication of Pagowsky and McElroy's two-volume *Critical library pedagogy handbook* (2016), which contains a collection of essays, workbook activities and lesson plans that are readily applied to teaching. Notably in respect to the mainstreaming of CIL and its more widespread visibility in North American librarianship, these volumes were published by the American Library Association. Also contributing to theoretical and practical advancements at this time was the edited volume *Critical literacy for information professionals* (McNicol, 2016). Simultaneously, research that sought to identify and concretise critical information literacy themes and practices was conducted by Downey in *Critical information literacy: foundations, inspirations, and ideas* (2016) as well as articles by Tewell (2016, 2018). Shortly afterwards, considerable work was expanding CIL's theoretical

inspirations, from Greek theories of time to critical geography to media studies (Drabinski, 2017; Nicholson, 2018; Tewell, 2017). Now twenty years after CIL's initial appearances in the literature, it has been the subject of many additional works theorising, translating it into classroom practice and providing long overdue critique.

Critical information literacy literature: 2016-present

Method

To locate publications on critical information literacy published since an earlier review conducted by Tewell (2015), the author conducted searches of three databases: *Library and information science abstracts* (LISA), *Library & information science source* (LISS) and *Google scholar*. Search terms included: '*critical information literacy*', '*critical pedagogy and libraries*', '*critical literacy and libraries*' and '*critical library instruction*'. Additionally, the author used controlled vocabularies in LISA and LISS as well as the '*Cited by*' and '*Related articles*' functions in Google scholar to identify relevant publications. After searches no longer generated new publications, the list of publications was reviewed to remove items that did not address critical approaches to information literacy or critical information literacy specifically (e.g., articles that focused on critical thinking).

Regarding geographical scope, publications in languages other than English were included to the extent that they appeared in the searches conducted. Other authors have researched and written on critical information literacy and related concepts in other global contexts, which contribute important perspectives beyond this paper's primarily English-language focus. Cherian et al. (2022) surveyed academic librarians working in the state of Kerala, India on their attitudes towards critical information literacy and critical librarianship, while Santos (2024) reflects on critical information literacy's evolution and application in the Philippines. Further, Manhique et al. (2023) survey Portuguese- and English-language literature on critical information literacy literature up to 2021, and Crilly (2024) reviews case studies of critically informed actions in academic libraries that encompasses antiracism and decolonisation with an emphasis on the United Kingdom.

Publication trends

To provide insight into when and where publications were completed, both the year of publication and number of CIL publications by country were calculated. Year of publication was identified using citation information, while publications by country was based on an author's country of residence using their affiliation noted in the publication. In cases of multiple authors, if all authors of a publication resided in the same country, only one tally was made, whereas if authors were based in different countries, each country was counted once. Countries represented include, in order of the most frequently represented in the literature: United States, United Kingdom, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, Sweden, China, Spain, Nigeria, South Africa, Finland, India, Mozambique, Philippines and Serbia.
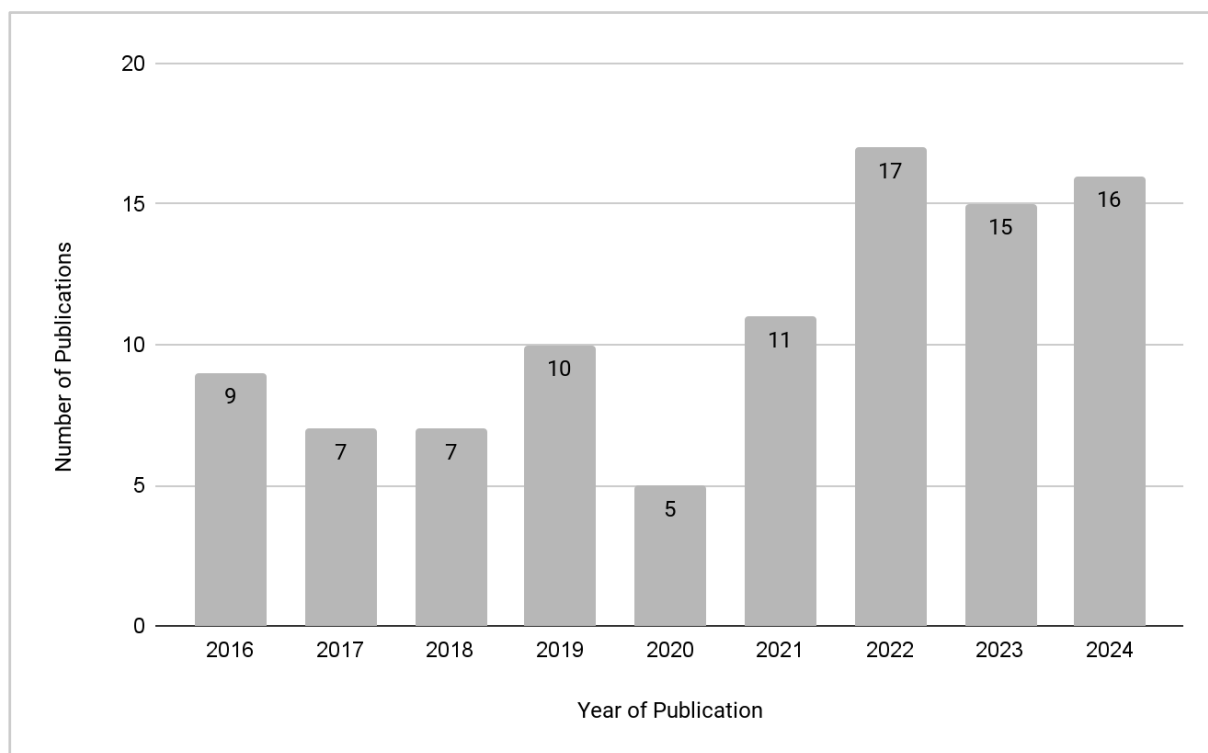
Figure 1. CIL publications by year, 2016-2024.
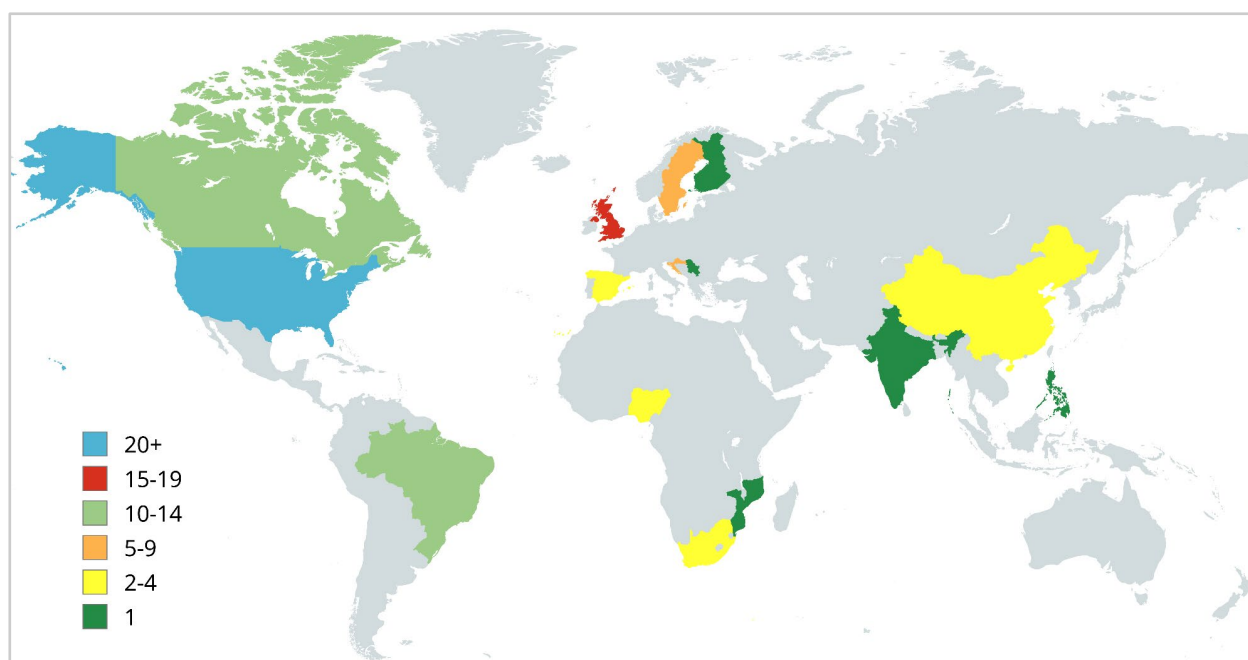
Figure 2. CIL publications by country, 2016-2024.

Themes

Thematic areas were developed by reviewing individual articles and discerning their primary topics and focuses. This review resulted in six thematic areas, which were then grouped under three larger thematic categories that encompassed the subthemes. Themes include: 1) Conceptualising

and theorising; 2) Responding to contemporary politics and technologies; and 3) Critiquing critical information literacy. Each theme is explored in more detail below.

Conceptualising and theorising

Questions of what constitutes the bounds of critical information literacy and associated information practices have been increasingly present in the literature, along with CIL's application to different learning contexts and the adoption of models outside of library and information science that have potential to inform LIS research and practice. These works contribute to CIL's knowledge base by identifying connections across fields and identifying opportunities for further dialogue. A number of researchers have recently studied how information literacy is presented through discourse analysis and related approaches (Bezerra and Beloni, 2019; Johansson and Limberg, 2017; Multas and Hirvonen, 2019; Seale, 2016; Walton and Cleland, 2017), challenges to its adoption and recognition in present-day information environments (Haider and Sundin, 2022a; Hicks, 2024; Oliphant, 2021; Šobota, 2024; Šobota, 2023), and examined its theoretical foundations and contributions (Bezerra, 2021; Flierl and Maybee, 2020; Špiranec, 2018; Webber and Johnston, 2017). Notably, tensions between the *empowerment* that academic information literacy outwardly promises contrasted with the deficit-oriented approach it often adopts internally have been made clear by Hicks and Lloyd (2021), while cline and López-McKnight (2024) offer a useful decolonial reading of information literacy as a project and product of empire.

Studies which apply models or ways of thinking outside of library science to information literacy represent a second component of the Conceptualising and theorising theme. These represent a wide range of theories, adopted for their conceptual as well as practical implications. Such works draw upon literacies in other fields (Chiewphasa and Sisk, 2022; Doyle, 2019; Johansson, 2023; Kuglitsch, 2018; Pavelić and Špiranec, 2021), rhetoric and composition studies (Baer, 2016; Zanin-Yost and Freie, 2020), concepts originating in Greece and Germany (Drabinski, 2017; Elmborg, 2022), Indigenous identity and ways of knowing (Littletree et al., 2023), human geography (Nicholson, 2018), user experience (Hicks et al., 2022), political theory (Cope, 2017), media studies (Tewell, 2017), anti-apartheid activism (Schneider and Bastos, 2021) and critical theories including anti-colonialism, black feminism, feminism and Marxism (Tanus and Gomes, 2024; Moreno, 2023; Doyle and Brisola, 2022; Schneider and Bezerra, 2023).

Research investigating different populations' information practices as they relate to critical information literacy are also present in the recent literature. Such works study job categories or workers more broadly, such as social workers (Sharun, 2023) or how workers use information in protection of their rights (Šobota and Špiranec, 2022), while others examine how individuals apply critical information literacy to their use of mainstream and social media to combat violence against women (Mudhai et al., 2016), how adolescents critically assess sources and bring infrastructural awareness to digital information environments (Haider and Sundin, 2022b) and the personal dynamics between information literacy and citizenship (Cloudesley, 2021).

Situating critical information literacy in relation to various scholarly disciplines has been a major development in the literature. In an examination of how information literacy has influenced and is adopted by selected fields and disciplines, Hicks et al. found through small-scale qualitative mapping that, '*information literacy has been most visibly leveraged into professional fields and disciplines, including in areas where librarians are more commonly working (e.g. higher education and nursing)*' (2023, p. 561). Critical information literacy praxis specific to business (Stonebraker et al., 2017), criminology (Stockdale et al., 2022), music history and music (Conor, 2019; Wells et al., 2022) and STEM (del Junco, 2024; Storksdieck, 2016) have been explored. Undertaking a study that interviewed academic researchers concerning possibilities for critical information literacy in decolonising the university, Marsh found that CIL holds potential to '*facilitate positionality, practice relationality and consider transitionality,*' including, '*scaffolding a decolonising approach to learners' navigation of information and processes of knowing*' (2022, p. 4). Notably, the

aforementioned works all represent higher education contexts. Only two publications concerning teaching practices in other settings were located, which are on the topics of encouraging public library workers to adopt CIL pedagogy in their work with people who are incarcerated (Hancock, 2021) and critical public librarianship, especially as it relates to library collections (Garrett, 2020).

Responding to contemporary politics and technologies

CIL offers a means to respond to political changes and technological developments, and to not only raise such issues for discussion but to critically question and challenge them. A considerable number of researchers have considered CIL in relation to its potential for responding to societal challenges such as combating disinformation, contending with *post-truth* ideologies and supporting democratic ideals, as well as those which are more technological in nature. While critical information literacy itself is far too marginal to make a dent in larger forces shaping society, the aspirational goals of CIL are present in many works within this theme.

Concerning the subtheme of Disinformation, post-truth and democracy, CIL has been proposed as an effective means of teaching how to evaluate online sources, especially the proliferation of *fake news* and mis- and disinformation (Brisola and Doyle, 2019; Cooke, 2018; O'Hara, 2024; Rajić, 2022; Wendt et al., 2024). Other authors call upon library and information science workers to take up '*information activism*' to respond to hate speech and disinformation (Cuevas-Cerveró et al. 2023; Martínez-Ávila and Cuevas-Cerveró, 2022); to adopt '*revolutionary information literacy*' as a way to contend with capitalist systems that promote disinformation (LaDue, 2024); suggest reading clubs that use a CIL foundation to counter the post-truth era (Zubac, 2023); and propose CIL as a teaching strategy uniquely suited to education in a post-pandemic era, both for university students and for lessening the digital divide (Liao and Tian, 2022; Figueiredo and Borges, 2021). CIL's role in supporting civic engagement and democracy more broadly has been explored by researchers from theoretical and civic engagement standpoints (Bonnet et al., 2019; Lawal, 2019; Polizzi, 2020). Most notably, Esmail (2023) surveys the struggle for control over the contemporary information environment, including attacks on libraries that include book bans, censorship challenges and targeted harassment campaigns and how critical information literacy can be used to spur collective action; while Bezerra and Schneider's (2022) edited volume *Critical information literacy: theory, consciousness and praxis* collects leading work on critical information literacy research and practice in Brazil.

The second subtheme is Emerging technology, which authors view from a variety of perspectives. Researchers have applied CIL concepts to new technologies and ways of finding and creating information, including algorithmic culture and increased reliance on algorithms, especially as related to awareness and agency (Haider and Sundin, 2021; Lloyd, 2019); data visualisation and time-based bias and politics (Johansson and Steglund, 2021); the massive growth in data and data infrastructure (Špiranec, 2019); participatory web environments (Špiranec, 2016); creating a training programme for European librarians to address emerging digital challenges (García-Quismondo, 2024); and, most recently, generative artificial intelligence applications (Wang et al., 2024). In the future one can expect a great deal more work on generative AI, given the serious ethical and environmental concerns its usage poses.

Critiquing critical information literacy

Critique of CIL itself represents a fourth thematic area. It is no coincidence that larger systems of domination are present within and reified by critical information literacy, since CIL research has remained a largely white and North American endeavour. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that while racism and cultural imperialism should be major concerns of CIL, they remain underdiscussed and largely unattended to. This preserves the existing power relations that in principle CIL seeks to disrupt, and some authors have taken to interrogating CIL's contradictions and shortcomings across various lines.

CIL has always recognised the importance of critique as applied to libraries and information systems, but it took over fifteen years for considerable critique of CIL itself to emerge. Leung and López-McKnight (2020) have remarked upon CIL's inattention to racialised oppression and white supremacy, which have been strikingly underexplored in its theory and practice. Other critiques oriented towards critical librarianship and CIL were published in the same special journal issue reflecting on the volume *Critical library instruction: theories and methods* (2010), including Feretti's (2020) consideration of critical library work's failings when extended past the classroom into the workplace and one's relationships with colleagues, and Seale's (2020) identification of the institutionalisation of critical librarianship and the management of critique that comes with widespread acceptance, leading to depoliticisation. Relatedly, Tanus (2022) explores the '*social institutionalisation*' of progressive and critical librarianship based upon the existing literature.

A special issue on critical information literacy in the *Journal of Information Literacy* includes a reflection from the editors which acknowledges a lack of focus on race as well as an authorship predominantly representing North America and the UK, which are substantial issues present in CIL at large (Smith and Hicks, 2023). Other critiques of CIL include a lack of engagement with racism and critical race theory (Haigh, 2024; Pashia, 2021); underrepresentation of working-class knowledge and information experiences (Flynn et al., 2023); that social justice-oriented teaching can become hypocritical when content and teaching methods are not aligned and lacks critical self-reflection (Vong, 2024); and that pushback from academic faculty, other librarians or administration and students posed threats to implementing CIL in classroom practice (Williams and Kamper, 2023). Further examinations of labour, power and critical library pedagogy have been undertaken by Mirza et al. (2023), who identify CIL discourses of agency and empowerment to be inadvertently emphasising individualism instead of collective action, and argue that the recognition of library labour is a key component of any meaningful pedagogy.

Critical information literacy issues and failings

This review of the literature reveals several prominent interests in CIL research, but what and who is underrepresented or absent from the literature altogether is just as important to consider. CIL currently lacks attention to essential topics, including race and labour. CIL's lack of focus on race and white supremacy is particularly troubling given library and information science's history and demographics, while inadequate recognition of labour and working conditions as a fundamental aspect of information literacy is another failing. Additionally, the CIL literature consists of a primarily North America-centric representation and thereby is largely informed by western ways of knowing and engaging with information, as well as a focus on and within higher education settings that greatly limits the possibilities for CIL theory and practice. These concerns have been voiced in the literature and are explored below.

Race

Racism and white supremacy animate the foundations and ongoing practices of libraries and dominant information systems across the Global North, which makes the absence of attention to race in the CIL literature troubling. This failing is especially concerning in a field that in North America is predominantly white and must reckon with its past and present complicity in upholding systems of racialised oppression (Espinal et al., 2018). As Ferretti observes:

> *libraries, like academia, are historically white serving, have been complicit in the white racial project of the United States during the 19th century, and perpetuate the racial inequity in the field today through mechanisms such as unpaid labor* (2020, p. 142).

The lack of presence of race in CIL discussions is highly problematic because it signifies such issues are not a primary concern and reinforces the underlying ideologies of white supremacy. Another question is what impact would be made if CIL researchers did in fact centre and confront racism as demanding urgency and action. While this would represent a necessary corrective in the

literature, without action it still lacks meaningful material changes. Leung and López-McKnight question such greater narratives of progress, noting that, *'progress in the profession is generally defined by a liberal marker of attainment that has no real, concrete impact in the lives of those most marginalized'* (2020, p. 14). Writing about critical librarianship in particular, the authors find that in ignoring white supremacy, critical librarianship *'mirror[s] the false promises of diversity and inclusion initiatives and advance the reification of White Supremacy'* (p. 16). To begin to engage with systems of oppression in information platforms and practices, CIL must meaningfully address white supremacy and legacies of racism in libraries and information literacy.

Labour

The CIL literature also largely fails to meaningfully discuss labour and the material conditions that shape one's engagement with information literacy, whether as a teacher, learner or both. Ferretti has pointed to this issue and in particular how critical pedagogy has led to changes in information literacy instruction, but has not made a dent in library workplaces, including how colleagues continue to uphold existing power relations (2020). In their exploration of labour and critical library instruction, Mirza et al. argue that critical library instruction's *'overemphasis on the agency and ability of an abstract charismatic teacher works instead to reinscribe neoliberal logics and white savior narratives in libraries, working against solidarity and collaboration'* (2023, p. 116). Assuming that library instructors already have agency within a classroom or other spheres greatly simplifies existing power relations, recklessly positions educators as *'already empowered'* and learners as requiring empowerment, and leads directly to the potential for white saviour assumptions and narratives (Mirza et al., 2023). cline and López-McKnight also identify this thread of individualism and question the end result of critical information literacy and information literacy more broadly, asking whether they are:

> *acculturating us to the oppressive, extractive, capitalist/colonial systems in which they are enmeshed – even if they are attentive to these structures or have an analysis of power – rather than dismantling them or fundamentally changing the world and how it is configured* (2024, p. 10).

An inattention to labour in the literature also represents a missed opportunity in making meaningful connections with learners as well as other workers. In identifying how to address the challenges that capitalism poses to CIL practice, Espinel and Tewell suggest that academic library workers focus on the information economy and scholarly communication systems in their teaching, but also *'identify shared issues within their workplaces to organize around and build coalitions outside libraries to transform what is possible for academic labor and student learning alike'* (2023, p. 573). These criticisms of CIL's shortcomings in changing the workplace, its centring of individualist and overly simplistic narratives of change, and lack of considering opportunities for building shared power among workers are significant and should be addressed moving forward.

Western-centric

The existing CIL literature is highly influenced by and often produced using viewpoints that prioritise western and Eurocentric perspectives. Lloyd draws attention to this issue by observing:

> *IL as it is currently presented is an anglicised concept which centralises power and the construction of authority within a western system, which by virtue accommodates a primarily western-informed view of what constitutes information and knowledge and methodologies which are authorised for teaching and learning* (2024, p. 25).

Lloyd offers that acknowledging and coming to terms with this western-dominant influence is, *'the first step to recognizing the bias in our entrenched approaches to IL'* (p. 25). Because such worldviews shape the past and present of information literacy research and theory, it is all the more important that additional perspectives, including recognising the fact that learners always bring with them

their own information literacy knowledge and practices, are actively involved in CIL theory and practice. Though the existing literature is steeped in western-centric views and mostly originates from the Global North, an increasing number of researchers from outside of North America are making substantive contributions to CIL conversations, especially those based in Brazil. Despite CIL presently lacking a robust knowledge base outside of western systems, it is an area that appears to be changing for the better.

As CIL grows increasingly examined and applied internationally it is important to remain attentive to the potentially imperialistic nature of *exporting* information literacy with lack of regard for context, as considered by Pilerot and Lindberg in their analysis of international policy documents concerning information literacy (2011). The reproduction and dissemination of western cultural imperialism would clearly be at odds with critical information literacy's intended aims, but such a risk is pronounced and requires reflection by CIL researchers internationally. A universal version of CIL does not and should not exist because it is a situated practice deeply dependent on time, place and the sociopolitical dynamics that shape who we are and the decisions we make.

Higher education focus

An overwhelming number of CIL researchers and practitioners are based in higher education. CIL has a more academic orientation than some other subfields of information literacy, which are in general more likely to consider information practices outside of academe and as they occur in informal learning settings. As a result, CIL currently lacks a more expansive view on information literacy's use and potential. In the review conducted, only two publications concerning teaching practices are not focused on higher education settings (Hancock, 2021; Garrett, 2020).

Writing about critical librarianship, Beilin argues that the association of critical library thought with academia '*carries certain risks, especially the danger that it will exclude many if not all librarians and LIS scholars outside academia who consider themselves 'critical' or committed to social justice*' (2018, p. 196). CIL would undoubtedly benefit from considering where and how it can be applied outside of academic settings, with particular attention towards its aims of social justice. In the same way that critical information literacy's western-centric perspectives are detrimental and limiting, a focus on and within higher education ignores the many ways that CIL can and does occur in informal learning, civic engagement, the workplace, digital information platforms and many other places and purposes.

Conclusion

Critical information literacy seeks to understand oppression as it occurs within and is perpetuated by libraries and information systems, and ultimately for library workers and learners to intervene in these systems to change them. This review and analysis of the literature indicates that the theory and practice of CIL continues to flourish and expand. CIL has sought to intervene in the dominant information literacy discourse, which is often inattentive to the sociopolitical dimensions of information's production and use. CIL practice often occurs through small-scale work efforts, making it difficult to discern what material impact, if any, CIL has had on teaching and learning in libraries. While CIL is often defined in opposition to mainstream information literacy concepts and practices, it has become integrated into this more dominant discourse in considerable ways (Seale, 2020). As the world faces developments such as the international rise of right-wing populism and technologies such as generative AI that pose ethical and environmental concerns, CIL itself cannot solve any widespread problems but it holds potential to meaningfully address them in teaching and learning settings, especially when a critical lens is applied to present-day information tools and environments (Pho and Tranfield, 2024; Zvyagintseva and Blechinger, 2023).

What are the next steps for critical information literacy? In addition to coming to terms with the issues and failings described above, drawing upon other relevant movements and contemporary theories would represent an important step. To actively work towards causes such as antiracism

and anti-sexism, those who research and practise CIL can learn from activist and social justice movements. While is a significant first step to surface CIL-related issues through scholarship and teaching, these efforts often lack the ability to move learning, workplaces and the field forward in larger ways (Leung, 2022). In this respect, learning the strategies of activists and what it takes to build movements can only benefit library and information workers. To effectively challenge that which is exploitative and unjust, it is essential to organise collectively and build shared power. As Beilin writes:

> organizing and resisting the corporatizing and austerity measures of university administrations is a very concrete way to put theory into practice. The struggles for fair contracts and against lockouts and other actions against workers can mobilize critical librarianship into direct action for justice and democracy (2018, pp. 205-206).

Finally, it is worthwhile to recognise that CIL should be considered as not static and unchanging, but instead, '*a dynamic concept that evolves by accounting for sociopolitical realities*' (Šobota, 2024, p. 38). After all, cline and López-McKnight ask, what is the use of critical information literacy, or any literacies, if they do not support and facilitate:

> the development of critical consciousness, the formation and maintenance of collectivism and solidarity, and the larger abolitionist project of dismantling oppressive systems and institutions that regulate information, and creating new forms of information that are liberatory and communal? (2024, p. 10).

Critical information literacy is necessarily an ongoing work in progress, and in its current formations too often reinforces the very systems of racism and eurocentrism it must seek to interrupt. Looking forward, by drawing upon the research done to explore CIL and expand our understandings of information – including whether it is even possible to move information literacy towards a more liberatory future – the best chance for meaningful CIL theory and practice is to take up this work together.

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