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The negative spaces of information literacy: An alternative research agenda

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Abstract

Suggestions that information literacy (IL) is being employed in subversive or unorthodox activities, including criminal or anti-democratic aims, have largely been dismissed as evidence for the need for more IL instruction. Possible solutions to situations in which librarian-promoted IL skills advance subversive activities, which include a renewed focus on standardisation or virtue epistemology, introduce additional issues, such as whose values would prevail. In contrast, engagement with IL's negative space, a design term that refers to the aspects of a composition that surround the main focal object, provides an opportunity to learn about what has been obscured through our focus on more socially acceptable goals — and develop a richer, more responsive understanding of practice.

Keywords
anti-establishment; democracy; information literacy; negative space

Introduction

When Paul Zurkowski (1974), Scott Simonds (1974) and other knowledge workers were marshalling their respective conceptualisations of information and health literacy in the 1970s, the idea of being literate was imagined in uniquely glowing terms. Influenced by the United States' national education agenda, which positioned literacy as the means through which the country would consolidate national security and global competitiveness (Brandt, 2004), literacy was credited with creating a fitter and more responsive workforce for the information age. Since then, IL has been variously linked with other beneficial outcomes, including improved academic performance (e.g., Rockman, 2002), the creation of wealth (e.g. Pilerot & Lindberg, 2011),

and more recently, social justice-oriented action (e.g. Tewell, 2015). These studies have resulted in the positioning of IL as an inherent "moral good" (Hicks, Lloyd & Pilerot, 2023) that will "autonomously" (Street, 2003) lead to social change.

Yet, even as some parts of the field double down on the elusive 'impact' of being informed (Ryan et al., 2023), suggestions that IL is being employed in a range of less 'virtuous' activities, including criminal or anti-democratic aims, means that others are starting to question the tenor of this conversation. These concerns are often dismissed as aberrations within professional narratives, evidence of the need for more IL instruction rather than anything else. However, I argue that unorthodox and subversive information activities should instead be understood as IL's negative space, a design term that refers to the aspects of the composition that surround the main focal object. Most famously exemplified by the [Rubin face vase](#), in which the backdrop to the receptacle creates additional meaning, the concept of negative space is useful because it draws attention to what is rendered invisible within dominant narratives while also forcing an awareness of the object as a whole. It also forms a handy play on words for the adverse or disagreeable nature of this IL work, a term that also references Burnett and Lloyd's (2020) conceptualisation of "dark knowledge" as what is hidden from power. Whichever way we interpret negative space, I argue that acknowledging and starting an open dialogue about IL's vulnerability is one of the most vital conversations that we need to have if the field is to thrive across the next fifty years.

From positive to negative space

Research specifically questioning the assumed positive outcomes of IL first started to emerge in the early 2020s as scholars turned their attention to social polarisation. Moving beyond the typical deficit approach that positioned "unorthodox viewpoints" (Lee et al., 2021) as resulting from a lack of information skills, researchers noted the variety of sophisticated approaches that counterpublic groups employed to achieve their agendas, including the agentic use of information tools and technologies. Thus, Crystal Lee and colleagues (2021) found that Coronavirus sceptics leveraged a wide range of conventional information strategies to advocate for desired anti-establishment policy changes, including critically assessing and identifying bias in information sources. These ideas were further extended by Matthew Hannah (2023, p. 209), who traced parallels between the knowledge practices listed in the ACRL Framework (2016) and the tactics of QAnon, a far-right conspiracy theory political movement, arguing that "QAnon functions as a twisted form of IL" in which value is accorded to traditional methods of research and analysis. COVID-19 research also corroborated scholarship that illustrated how vaccine hesitant people carry out "intensive (and critical) reading of information from a wide variety of sources" (Hobson-West, 2007, p.209), with Hicks and Lloyd (2022b) noting that people who delayed their COVID-19 vaccination demonstrated critical, situated, and embodied ways of managing information. These studies provide a disconcerting challenge to progressive conceptualisations of information activity.

Since then, effort has been made to contest the potential implications of these findings. In what forms one of the most careful arguments to date, Haider and Sundin (2022) point out that the complex situatedness of social practice, wherein communities are guided by very different material realities, directly presupposes that IL will, autonomously, lead to social and economic change. As they point out, "the relationship between literacy and progress, literacy and democracy, or literacy and increased equality or social justice more broadly, does not materialise by itself" (p.59). From this perspective, claims of IL's impact on social progress

should be seen as strategic rather than as causal. However, Haider and Sundin then go on to argue that the discrediting of this rhetoric does not stop us from foregrounding the values and critical tools that we want to prevail within our information literacy agenda. In effect, they contend that if we want to propose IL as a solution to the growth of anti-democratic and extremist voices, then we must be prepared to impose normative ideals about what IL should entail. As they warn, if IL "does not point at something shared, it runs the risk of becoming void of meaning" (p. 60) or, at the very least, dismissive of the "plurality of positions, voices and opinions" (p. 68) from which liberal democracy emerges. Positioning normativity as a way to advance "shared standpoints that enable collective meaning-making" (p. 69) rather than as merely the means to evaluate capacity, this reasoning provides a way to reinforce the value of information literacy in the face of existential challenge.

And yet, recommitting ourselves to normative ideals also raises concerns, including the need to consider what we might lose if we were to re-align IL with standardised frameworks. As Haider and Sundin (2022, p. 58) themselves point out, standardisation enforces racist assumptions about what counts as knowledge or information literate practice. The work that sociocultural IL research does to expose damaging power structures provides a further illustration of how an uncritical acceptance of standardisation in the moment of practice could harm both the field and, ironically, its social goals. One concern lies with the messages that normative guidelines promote; scholarship identifying the presence of deficit narratives within institutional documents, for example, undermines IL's presumed beneficial outcomes by illustrating how typical empowerment discourses are predicated upon acquiescence to rather than a contesting of power relations (Hicks & Lloyd, 2021). The prioritisation of compliance-focused learning outcomes within current IL documents provides a further indication of the limited scope that the normative approach has for dealing with complex information infrastructures (Hicks & Lloyd, 2022a). A related concern lies in what is excluded from a standardised conception of information literacy. The typical omission of information avoidance from professional guidelines, for example, is challenged by COVID-19 research that demonstrates how purposefully limiting information helps people to 'go on' during an emotionally draining time (Lloyd & Hicks, 2022). These findings, which point to the ongoing influence of rationalism within IL discourse (also see Tuominen, 1997), further contest the value of this approach within crisis situations.

So, what might a solution be for a situation in which librarian-promoted IL skills are being used to advance subversive or hostile goals? On the one hand, the growth of scholarship examining the operationalisation of information activity within anti-establishment contexts directly challenges the last fifty years of information literacy research and practice, including its organising documents or structures. Can we really continue earnestly applying the ACRL Framework (2016) to our lesson plans, for example, when we know that the very same strategies are being used to perpetuate racist internet conspiracy? On the other hand, alternative suggestions to address these issues, which include introducing an overt moral thread into IL teaching in the shape of virtue epistemology (McMenemy & Buchanan, 2019; Bivens-Tatum, 2022, Gorichanaz, 2023), introduce a swathe of other problems, including whose morals would predominate and under which social conditions these ideals might prevail. We've already (arguably unsuccessfully) dabbled with dispositions within IL teaching (Seale, 2016) and the fate of information avoidance, outlined above, provides a prime example of the fine line between moral character development and deficit thinking. Given these choices, it seems that Haider & Sundin's (2022, p. 60) argument for normativity may, in fact, be the most viable resolution, particularly if moral and political values are "made visible for what they are" rather than covertly assumed.

From negative to positive space

What if, however, there were another option? What if, instead of instinctively clinging to morals and compliance, we saw challenges to taken-for-granted truths as an opportunity to learn about the aspects of IL that might have been obscured through our focus on more socially acceptable goals? In effect, how might situations that are not typically aligned with librarian-derived understandings of IL create insight into the development of knowing—and how might we use this knowledge to start a conversation about which aspects of practice we might want to salvage—and which we do not? IL has only just started to grapple with questions of power and agency, for example, while concern has been raised that "the goals of civic knowledge and participation closely tracks white, middle- class and college-educated people who can 'afford' the costs [of information use]" (Buschman, 2023, p. 8). Along these lines, what might research into contested IL practice tell us about how the construction of information landscapes is enabled and constrained, including how knowledge becomes authorised or stigmatised and the conditions that shape agentic performance? These questions may seem flippant as political and social polarisation threatens lives and livelihoods as well as social democratic structures, but I argue that it is only through an awareness of the *entirety* of IL that we can face the challenge to its integrity.

It is IL's negative space that I therefore suggest should be driving forward the next fifty years of research and practice in the field. Negative or empty (Brook, 1968/2008) space is just as important as positive space within artistic practice; the focus on the area around the figure brings balance to a composition by defining both the subject and the boundaries of a piece (Rosenblatt, 2010). In effect, negative space forms "the lungs" of a design by creating breathing room that allows for the accentuation of what really matters (Tschichold, 2006, p. 54). Applied to IL, the concept of negative space refers to the regions that surround the practice—the elements that sit outside or apart from a foregrounded representation of IL—rather than the practice itself. Drawing attention to what we might miss when we position what we might expect or have been taught to see (and hear, feel, experience, and do (Buetow, 2009) when IL forms the subject of the composition, the emphasis on "unobserved and dismissed interstices of our world" (Hill, 2014), which also chimes with Lloyd's work on absence in this special issue, gives us a perspective on information activity that is not always visible when we only address what is "worthy" of consideration. At the same time, the interconnectedness of the positive and negative space illustrates that an extension of analytical focus to contexts where we might consider there is no valuable information activity to explore supports an awareness of IL (and its discourse) as a whole, including through forcing us to look carefully at what we are activating or centring in our work.

In sum, the recent move away from exploring "pro-social" information environments (Linstead et al., 2014) has started to challenge the affirmative shape of IL, both in terms of its assumed outcomes and established information activities. While suggestions to introduce a more overt focus on the normative or moral dimensions of IL address some of the concerns that arise from the association of information activity with political and social radicalisation, they also introduce a whole swathe of additional issues, including the risk of perpetuating meaningless or even harmful advice when critical thinking becomes weaponised (boyd, 2016). In contrast, a focus on negative space creates a unique opportunity to start conversations about the boundaries and logics of IL practice, including a consideration of what current discourse closes us off to as well as what it opens up. These conversations will not be easy, not least because a focus on anti-social behaviour introduces additional methodological considerations, including how we explore

sensitive issues reflexively rather than voyeuristically. However, as Burnett and Lloyd (2020) point out, if we continue to position information as something that makes a difference (Bateson, 1972) then we must be open to this difference being discordant as well as co-operative. If IL, too, is to create change then we must be similarly receptive to what lies outside our current frame of reference, including troublesome political and ideological concerns.

Declarations

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