Beyond the Threshold: Conformity, Resistance, and the ACRL Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education

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In Brief: The recently adopted ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education has generated much critique and discussion, including many important reflections on the nature of information literacy and librarianship itself. This article provides a brief consideration of some of these responses and as well a critique of the Framework from the perspective of critical information literacy. It argues that although the Framework demonstrably opens up possibilities for an information literacy instruction that encourages students to question the power structures and relations that shape information production and consumption, it nonetheless rests on a theoretical foundation at odds with that goal. It urges librarians to embrace the Framework yet also resist it, in the tradition of critical librarians who have practiced resistance to the instrumentalization of the library for neoliberal ends.

The ACRL Framework: Off to a Running Start

By design and in its implementation, the process of drafting the ACRL Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education invited intense scrutiny and critique. The Task Force charged with creating the Framework began its work in March 2013 and released the first draft for public scrutiny in February of the following year. ((See the ACRL Board of Directors Action Form from January 15, 2015 for background and details about the process of drafting the Framework.)) Through three drafts to the final version, which was made public in January 2015 and officially "filed" (approved by the ACRL Board of Directors) shortly thereafter, the effort toward transparency included many opportunities for input that will help the Framework earn a strong measure of democratic consent and broad participation. But a successful launch and general adoption are by no means assured, as the resistance to plans to scrap the existing Standards has been and may continue to be strong. ((See for example the Open Letter of New Jersey Librarians criticizing the Framework and protesting the sunsetting of the ACRL Standards, which indicates that there will be opposition not only to the replacement of the Standards, but also the wholesale adoption of the Framework that is meant to replace it. The recent acceptance of the Framework by the ACRL Board of Directors was accompanied by a temporary cancellation of plans to sunset the Standards.)) Less easy for the Task Force to

control or to even keep track of, however, were reactions on blogs, Twitter, other social media, and in informal conversations, and these arenas continue to produce new and sometimes unexpected reactions to the proposed Framework.

It should have been expected that the lively debates among librarians have included searching, systematic, and thoroughgoing critiques of both the fundamental assumptions and the theory underlying the Framework and even its reason for existing at all. ((For space reasons, I refer the reader to Lane Wilkinson's helpful list of blog posts, which is now out of date, but provides a good starting point for reading a variety of responses to the Framework's early drafts.)) The draft process has provided an opportunity for many people to talk about the meaning and purpose of information literacy instruction, information literacy in general, and even librarianship itself. As Barbara Fister stated in one of her early commentaries on the Framework, "it is an opportunity for us to rethink how we do this and what kind of learning really matters." (Fister 2014a) I consider the Framework already to be a success because the debate it has generated contributes to our thinking about and practice of librarianship in invigorating, productive, and necessary ways.

In this article I will review and compare some of the critiques of the Framework voiced thus far. I will also offer a critique of my own that attempts to read the Framework from the perspective of critical information literacy and critical librarianship. Librarians who identify with these labels, generally speaking, seek to anchor information literacy practice and librarianship as a whole to a commitment to both principles of social justice and a systematic critique of the power relations within which our field operates. ((The literature on critical information literacy and critical librarianship (which are closely related and overlap quite a bit, but should not be equated) is rapidly expanding. See especially the contributions in Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier 2009; and Gregory and Higgins 2013. Probably the most extensive (though not exhaustive) bibliography of critical information literacy we have is to be found in the recent dissertation by B. A. McDonough, Critical Information Literacy in Practice, 2014.)) But first it is important to cite some of the ample evidence that a wide range of reflective librarians are embracing aspects of the Framework and running with it, with exciting results and prospects. This has happened because of the Framework's flexibility. Troy Swanson, a member of the Task Force, points out that the Framework "can enable us to get to real student learning because it can be adapted to align with your goals as a teacher." (Swanson 2015) Megan Oakleaf has echoed this sentiment, stating: "Essentially, librarians can use the Framework as inspiration to focus on concepts, rather than exclusively on tools and techniques, and those concepts can be added or subtracted as student and faculty needs change." (Oakleaf 2014) Andy Burkhart has described a library lesson for an ethnography class for which he utilized the threshold concept "Research as Inquiry." His conclusion is that "Using these threshold concepts may not work for everyone, but I can see them being exceedingly helpful to frame lessons and curricula. They help you focus on what is really important as opposed to getting stuck in what you think you are supposed to be teaching. Instead of just teaching a lesson about doing ethnographic research I taught a lesson about inquiry and asking increasingly sophisticated questions." (Burkhart, 2014) Arguing along similar lines more recently, Lori Townsend, Silvia Lu, Amy Hofer, and Korey Brunetti have defended threshold concepts for being flexible and versatile while still rooted in common problem areas specific to academic disciplines, even while allowing that the specific threshold concepts in the Framework are necessarily only provisional and may not work for everyone: "If you consider your content with the threshold concepts criteria in mind, it helps identify some things that might prove problematic for students and stall their learning, yet that are needed in order to move forward in their understanding." (Townsend, et al 2015)

Of more importance to my argument in this article is the evidence that librarians interested in critical information literacy and critical pedagogy are also inspired by the Framework. At at an upcoming LOEX15 session, for example, Eamon Tewell and Kate Angell will share how the Frame "Authority is Contextual and Constructed" "emboldened" them to construct "new ways to empower learners and discuss authority's role in evaluating resources." ("Elevating" 2015) Kevin Seeber has shown how the frame "Format as Process" allowed him to teach critical thinking skills in the context of web-scale discovery (Seeber 2015). Examples such as these (which seem to be multiplying daily) demonstrate the pedagogical value and potential of the Framework. Although several critical librarians have found threshold concepts and/or the Framework ((As Townsend, et al, have indicated in their recent *ACRLog* post, the Framework contains only one possible collection and interpretation of threshold concepts among many: potentially there might be other valid threshold concepts applicable to information literacy instruction. (Townsend, et al 2015))) wanting in one or more areas, and although I am also critical of both, I don't believe that these critiques invalidate the Framework. In fact, despite the reservations that I will outline below, the Framework does not contradict or undermine the possibility of a critical information literacy instruction or critical pedagogy, but may very well encourage it, which is a vital point that librarians should remember. Many librarians who are committed to critical librarianship seem to share this view since they see the Framework as more liberating pedagogically than it is constricting. ((Intriguingly, Fister has decided to embrace the Framework because it returns to the original promise of the ACRL Standards when they were established in 2000: they "were meant as a starting place, that each library should adapt them to fit their local cultures and needs. They weren't set in stone." (Fister 2015)))

A Variety of Responses

Before exploring the responses from the perspectives of critical information literacy and critical librarianship, I would like to provide an overview of some of the other critiques of the Framework's drafts. These critiques have been diverse, ranging from stunned incomprehension to almost utopian celebration.

One subset of responses to the Framework has made suggestions for improvement or requested clarification. These criticisms generally accept the Framework on its own terms and are concerned with its practicality, implementation, adaptability, and accessibility. People ask how the Frames or the threshold concepts upon which they are based will work in practice, what challenges will be posed by adopting the Framework, how different it will be from the Standards in this respect, and how librarians, faculty, and administrators will be convinced to replace explicit Standards with a set of guidelines that are less prescriptive. ((The Task Force's report attached to the final draft notes that in its tally of the 206 comment forms submitted following the release of the third draft, 67.4% of respondents supported the Framework. (ACRL MW15 DOC 4.0) Some librarians have already embarked on projects to help librarians map the Standards to the Framework in order to help them understand the continuities and make the transition easier in redesigning instruction programs. See, for example, Amada Hovious' "Alignment Charts for ACRL Standards and Proposed Framework (work in progress)" and her related blog post.))

Many librarians are also anxious about potentially forfeiting the gains in information literacy instruction that have been achieved in the years since 2000, and which were at least partially premised on implementation and 'selling' of the Standards. This has already proven to be one of the Framework's major stumbling blocks; at least some librarians have voiced alarm that losing standards spells trouble for their IL programs and their libraries. ((Troy Swanson, in a recent response to some of these concerns, convincingly defends the Framework on the following grounds: "if we believe that information literacy matters in the lives of our students and see information literacy as a form of empowerment for our students, the idea that we should write standards because that's what everyone else is doing feels hollow." And, even more boldly, he suggests that "our profession has the opportunity to take the lead in moving away from the mechanistic bureaucracy of standards-based education. I do not know many faculty members who honestly think that more standards and more standardization will improve teaching and learning." (Swanson 2015) But Emily Drabinski urges us to take pause in this enthusiasm, alerting people how the Framework's ACRL imprimatur insures that it will function in much the same way the Standards has, only now libraries will have to shoulder the burden of spelling out the specific learning outcomes to which these guidelines may point. She suggests as an alternative a *kairos* of library instruction that does not rely on a universal, fixed document of any kind and that instead always responds to the specific time and place in which the instruction takes place. (Drabinski 2014) Critical advocates of the Framework, myself included, would claim in response that it actually encourages *kairos* by not prescribing any specific learning outcomes or benchmarks.))

Related to the concerns about the Framework's accessibility and saleability to stakeholders have been complaints about the drafts' alleged 'jargon.' Even though much of the language that earned this epithet has been removed as a result of these complaints, some voices continue to describe the Framework's use of language borrowed from threshold concept theory as jargon. ((Andy Burkhart, in a blog post, reported librarians at a discussion at 2014 ALA Midwinter referring to threshold concepts themselves as 'jargon.' (Burkhart, 2014))) This concern about language is partly tied to the anxieties about strained relationships with stakeholders, but it also reflects a certain resistance among academic librarians to theory imported from other disciplines into library practice or even into LIS scholarship. ((A distrust of theory from other fields of course is not limited to LIS or librarians. Academic history, for example, has maintained a stubborn resistance to theoretical approaches and many of its practitioners and gatekeepers are on the lookout for 'jargon' in an effort to maintain clarity and rigorous thinking. The writing and teaching of history is, like the practice of librarianship, self-consciously a 'popular,' or public-oriented undertaking, and the assumption is that it should always only utilize language immediately familiar to the widest possible audience. However well-intentioned and even democratic this impulse is, it is often used as an excuse for avoiding an engagement with developments in other fields, or for simply dismissing them. For a brief and spirited plea for the importance of theory for history, see Joan Wallach Scott, "Wishful Thinking," *Perspectives on History* (December 2012))) Even someone sympathetic to the ideas behind the Framework and to threshold concepts themselves might object to their explicit inclusion in a document which is intended to be used as a guide for establishing cross-disciplinary and inter-administrative relationships. ((Kevin Michael Klipfel disapproves of threshold concept theory not so much because it has been borrowed from another field, but because it has not been 'scientifically' validated and is therefore not legitimate in the eyes of his colleagues in other disciplines. See his blog post, "This I Overheard…Threshold Concepts Getting Laughed Out of the Room," *Rule Number One: A Library Blog*, 3 Nov. 2014. But even long before the Framework committee went to work revising the ACRL Standards, some librarians embraced threshold concepts precisely because there were positive signs of acceptance and enthusiasm from colleagues. See, for example, Brian Matthews, "What Can You Do to Help With Troublesome Knowledge? Librarians and Threshold Concepts," *The Ubiquitous Librarian*, Chronicle of Higher Education Blog Network, 3 Aug. 2011.))

But I would caution that although it may be true that the Framework's reliance on threshold concepts may put off some faculty members and administrators with whom we want to collaborate, we run the risk at the other extreme of offering something of only limited persuasive potential from the perspective of ideas, and this could jeopardize potential understanding and ultimately collaboration from non-library faculty members across the institution. Librarians, as members of the academic community, must be prepared to engage with the scholarship and research of our peers if we wish them to engage with ours. And the most serious evidence of such engagement is to find specifically library-related applications of theoretical approaches from such fields as education, psychology and anthropology. To embrace theory from other disciplines will inevitably require us to learn to adapt concepts and language from those fields. In other words, it will require the introduction of novel concepts and ideas, reflected in new vocabulary. But rather than be afraid of such importations, we

should engage them to test their foundations as well as their usefulness.

Another set of critiques has dissected the theoretical approach of the Framework, and while not complaining so much about jargon, still finds it flawed, often fatally so. These critiques have been thorough. They tend to focus on the theory of threshold concepts and its application in the frames themselves and subject it to interrogation and detailed analysis. Lane Wilkinson (a former member of the Task Force) has provided perhaps the most exhaustive analysis and deconstruction of threshold concept theory and its application to information literacy in the Framework. He set out to demolish much of the theory and language of the Framework in several detailed blog posts over the summer of 2014. (Wilkinson 2014a-g) Wilkinson's contentions are varied but his principal focus is mostly on the conceptual (in)coherence and contradictions of threshold concepts. There is less attention given to considerations of the ways that political, social, economic, and cultural power structures and relations are reflected by or are challenged by this approach to information literacy (although his discussion does not entirely exclude these concerns). ((In a similar vein to Wilkinson, Patrick Morgan, in a recent article, has described the Framework as 'inchoate.' (Morgan 2014) And Jacob Berg, in his blog, has echoed and elaborated on some of Wilkinson's critique, but his objections, too, I would classify more as linguistic-philosophical. (Berg 2014a-b)))

A Critical Information Literacy Perspective on Threshold Concept Theory

It is a main tenet of critical information literacy that information literacy instruction should resist the tendency to reinforce and reproduce hegemonic knowledge, and instead nurture students' understandings of how information and knowledge are formed by unequal power relations based on class, race, gender, and sexuality. Threshold concept theory, both as it was originally formulated and as it is applied in the Framework, can be seen as a reification of privileged knowledge that is historically and culturally contingent. ((For an explanation of how threshold concept theory has been applied to information literacy instruction, see the foundational articles by Hofer, Townsend, and Brunetti 2011, 2012.)) Threshold concepts attempt to align information literacy goals with the way that knowledge functions in our existing information system. Threshold concepts were elaborated specifically to better enable students to master the difficult specialized fields of knowledge that define the various academic and professional disciplines. But they may end up functioning as the means to merely reinforce disciplinary boundaries and institutional hierarchies.

Morgan has noted how the Framework's effort to present threshold concepts in this way has produced an elision of their origins and contexts: "threshold concepts are treated as immanent entities, unique to specific disciplines, and not as essentially contingent." (Morgan 2012, 7) Fister also cautions, in referring to the first draft: "…we need to bear in mind how these thresholds we define are cultural constructs and avoid assuming upper-middle-class white American experiences that might seem hostile or exclusionary to those who don't fit that assumed identity." (Fister 2014a) If threshold concepts are cultural constructs, then a critical information literacy must move beyond them somehow. While threshold concepts may have an important place in the process of learning, information literacy must demand that the concepts themselves be questioned as part of the critique of the structure of knowledge that a critical pedagogy encourages.

It is possible to see threshold concepts as an efficient way of getting students to become expert practitioners of existing disciplines. They do this, in a sense, by learning the rules. Threshold concepts can be viewed as the habits of mind that one must have in order to make sense within a given intellectual community. Wilkinson has noted that threshold concept theory has oversimplified or even misrepresented the true nature of academic disciplines, whose competing discourses reveal the opposite of what the theory claims: "The entire theory of threshold concepts has a funny way of oversimplifying the very real distinctions and difficulties that are inherent in a body of knowledge." (Wilkinson 2014a) I would add to this point that teaching students how to function within an academic discourse can be perilously close to teaching students how to conform, how to get along, how to succeed. We want our students to succeed, but do we want the system that will enable their success to succeed as well? Some may, but many librarians committed to critical librarianship do not. For the latter group the question is, how can we encourage student success without supporting the underlying structure of the system within which that success will take place?

Much of the rhetoric of information literacy, including that of the Framework, represents the world of information (the Framework refers to it as the "information ecosystem") as something that must be mastered by individual students making their own ways through an educational institution out into the world. Information literacy instruction is intended, positively and even progressively, to empower those individuals to succeed on their own terms to the greatest extent possible. It does this by inculcating habits of thinking and working that are most often described under the heading 'critical thinking.' But the problem with even some progressive information literacy rhetoric is that it does not question the fundamental units with which it is working: the individual information consumer/producer on the one hand, and the system of information on the other hand. The Framework, despite its (debatable) greater theoretical sophistication, its great flexibility as a tool for enabling dynamic and creative information literacy instruction, and its emphasis on collaborative learning, still posits as its goal an *individual* student who has become a master or expert of our system of information. And even though it seeks to empower that individual, who could potentially work to change the conditions of information production and dissemination that exist today, the Framework necessarily concentrates its efforts on the solitary mastery of the existing system.

Some critics have found the Framework too narrowly focused on library-centered activities and skills, and they have

questioned whether the specific threshold concepts in the Frames are uniquely characteristic of the 'field' of librarianship or information literacy. Fister states that as a librarian she isn't particularly "interested in helping students think like librarians, but rather as curious people who understand how information works so that they can be curious effectively and maybe change the world while they're at it." (Fister 2014b) Nicole Pagowsky has also expressed this sentiment in a blog post reacting to the first draft, referring specifically to the frame 'Format as Process' (renamed 'Information Creation as a Process' in the final draft). The frames pay insufficient attention to the factors beyond academia that shape students' consumption and production of information: "I was hoping to see a discussion on marginalized groups and whose voices get to be heard in traditional publishing and media (and why). These are important conversations to have with students, and particularly so when we are encouraging them to be creators of information, joining the conversation themselves. What impact might avenues of publishing have on their ability to be vocal when considering their perspective and identity? How is privilege intertwined in format and volume?" (Pagowsky 2014) These observations indicate that instruction librarians interested in integrating an understanding of these larger issues into information literacy will need to supplement and/or alter the frames' more restricted purview.

But even in its narrow focus, the Framework rests on questionable assumptions. The frame 'Scholarship as Conversation' ((This is the frame's name in the final draft of the Framework.)) tends to idealize or even naturalize the process of knowledge production in disciplinary fields. It presents scholarly research as a largely honorable pursuit, viewed in isolation from the forces operating around (and within) it: "Research in scholarly and professional fields is a discursive practice in which ideas are formulated, debated, and weighed against one another over extended periods of time." As described, it does not pay sufficient attention to the ways that some voices are suppressed, silenced, and marginalized because they do not fit the proscribed boundaries of that field – which are, in the end, determined by a consensus of practitioners whose professional reputations and livelihoods often depend on the preservation of these boundaries and conventions. In other words, threshold concepts describe knowledge creation in a decontextualized manner, even though the Framework tries to acknowledge the *academic* context of knowledge creation.

While one might not share Wilkinson's denial that scholarship is in fact a 'conversation,' one can't ignore how politics and power play a decisive role in the production of knowledge. (Wilkinson 2014b) It is a common complaint within many academic fields that conformity, uniformity, predictability and consensus are all-too common features of scholarship – are these the results of a 'conversation' or something else? Is it possible to build into the Framework an acknowledgement that scholarship and research themselves are always functioning within particular economic, social, and political systems that help determine the features and structure of the 'scholarly conversation?' Or must information literacy instruction move beyond threshold concepts altogether, even if it *begins* with them as a way of entering into and to some extent identifying with the existing structure of knowledge and expertise? These questions speak to one of the basic conundrums of critical librarianship and critical information literacy, namely: how does one teach students to understand and make the best use of existing systems of knowledge while at the same time prompt them to question the validity and structure of those systems? It's a similar conundrum faced by all scholars and teachers in academia who see themselves as committed to radical social change: how can one be a part of the system of oppression yet claim to be fighting against it? ((This is a question answered brilliantly by Joy James and Edmund T. Gordon who conclude that in some sense there is no such thing as 'radical' scholarship and teaching, since true activism actually cannot take place within the academy. (James and Gordon 2008) Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsey Smith offer a different view that sees more room for action for librarians in this regard because of their more liminal position in the academy. (Eisenhower and Smith 2009) See more on this in the section below.))

To better appreciate the perils of relying on threshold concepts, it may help to consider the needs for which the theory was originally developed. They were proposed by educational theorists Erik Meyer and Ray Land with reference to teaching concepts in economics. That discipline, at least as it is practiced in the 'western world' today, functions largely as a closed field based on a broad consensus about the universal validity (at least in the abstract) of the so-called 'free market', in other words, the universality and inevitability of capitalism. Economics, as an academic field, tends to naturalize capitalism and works to maintain the belief that the rules/laws of that system are simply the rules/laws of economics as such (even economists like Thomas Piketty who dare to challenge some of the field's pieties still share this core faith ((Slavoj Zizek and David Harvey each have noted that Piketty is best described as a utopian capitalist: for him there is no questioning the assumption that it is the only system that 'works.' See David Harvey, "Afterthoughts on Piketty's Capital"; Slavoj Zizek, "Towards a Materialist Theory of Subjectivity," lecture, The Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, University of London, May 22, 2014.))). It is very difficult for an economist who questions the fundamental assumptions of capitalism or denies its "laws" to succeed in or even enter the field, and the refusal to accept the field's central concepts prevents communication at a basic level with the vast majority of its practitioners. It is likely that a typical economist – someone who would be considered an 'expert' or 'authority' – would judge a person making such a challenge not only ineligible to participate in the field, but perhaps even a threat to it.

Meyer and Land do not pay attention to the limitations posed by established fields of knowledge, but rather the challenges that outsiders, or learners, face when trying to enter into productive learning, or 'conversation', *within* the field. Their insight was to identify certain seemingly universal characteristics of knowledge within disciplines that can be treated as concepts that one has to master in order to function successfully as a practitioner in that field. These 'troublesome concepts', once grasped, allow the learner to readily understand the assumptions and terms of debate in a field. But I would argue that at

this point the learner has in some sense reached the starting point, not the end point, of learning on a deeper level. Now the task is to question what one has just learned – and this is where the question of information literacy's ultimate goal returns.

What is the Purpose of Information Literacy Instruction?

From a critical information literacy perspective, the Framework's larger assumptions pose perhaps the biggest problems. One has to do with the term 'information literacy' and its complicated history. Critical information literacy has sought to increase awareness of how much the information literacy agenda has been set and supported by broader structural forces in academia and the world at large that may in fact be at odds with the core values of librarianship, progressive learning and radical social change. Christine Pawley, in a trenchant and erudite critique of what she calls "Information Literacy Ideology", states that information literacy "has contributed to the decontextualization of information, obscuring the specific conditions of its production." (Pawley 2003, 425) This decontextualization allows people to forget, or not to learn, that "Information never stands alone – it is always produced and used in ways that represent social relationships," and that those relationships "reflect the underlying patterns that structure society." (Pawley 2003, 433) Pawley has informed us that "information literacy" was elaborated at the beginning of the digital age and was intended largely to recuperate forms and markers of the authority from the age of print that were feared to be slipping away from librarians' control: "…institutional practices of information literacy have the effect of reestablishing relations of authority and authenticity that developed over three centuries for the print production of commodified information." (Pawley 2003, 440)

Much of information literacy instruction, yesterday and today, is focused on preparing students to succeed in both academia and the world beyond it – which more often than not amounts to teaching them skills of research and thinking that will enable them to function as productive independent minds in a competitive, rapidly changing economic environment. In other words, information literacy is designed to improve students' chances at getting jobs and succeeding in their chosen professions. ((Drabinski shows how this justification became the "procrustean bed" into which IL instruction was placed by the Standards, and she argues convincingly that the Framework inevitably is driven by the same mandate, which has only intensified since 2000. (Drabinski 2014))) No one who teaches and cares about students would object to that goal. But a critical information literacy expects more than this (and wants more for students); it pushes information literacy instruction, in various ways, not to be *limited* by this goal. Moreover, critical information literacy even looks beyond 'lifelong learning', since the question always should be asked, what actually is 'lifelong learning' and what is its purpose? As Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsey Smith have argued, lifelong learning and critical thinking fall within the realm of neoliberal rationality which push the learner "toward a perpetual anxiety of regulation, of adjustment, of optimization—and toward reason's perpetual self-improvement." (Eisenhower and Smith, 2009)

Information Literacy Instruction is also About Resistance

Chris Bourg, in a 2014 address at Duke University Libraries, insisted that despite the fact that "neoliberalism is toxic for higher education…research libraries can & should be sites of resistance." (Bourg 2014). Critical librarianship is at pains always to show that the existing information system mirrors the larger social and political order, which is characterized by a radically asymmetrical distribution of power, and is shot through, systematically and structurally, by racism, sexism, homophobia, militarism, and class oppression. An advocacy of progressive literacy of any kind within this system and environment, requires *resistance* on the part of the librarian: resistance to existing regimes of knowledge, as institutionalized by academic disciplines and departments (and enforced by academic rules and administrative bureaucracies), resistance to the commodification of knowledge, and even resistance to the stated goals of higher education as they are commonly promoted, especially by administrators, politicians, bureaucrats and educational reformers. Failing to resist all too easily provides reinforcement to the existing system, and helps reproduce it.

Joy James and Edmund T. Gordon have described the problematic position that a radical or activist intellectual necessarily assumes within academia. Their observations are relevant to the aspirations of critical information literacy and the basic dilemma that questions around the Framework have called attention to. They claim that academic institutions "are at best liberal-reformist in their institutional policies and at worst complicit with the global military-industrial and consumer-commercial, complex that enforces and/or regulates the marginalization and impoverishment of the majority of the world." They note that "Institutions of higher education have a vested interest in keeping scholarship 'objective' (mystifying), 'nonpolitical' (nonsubversive) and 'academic' (elitist) and in continuing to reserve the most advanced technical training for that small portion of the world's population who will manage the rest, as well as consume or control its resources and political economies." With such an important mandate, anyone who works within academia (i.e. who is engaged in the 'scholarly conversation') is subjected to intense pressures to conform: "…incentives offered by the academy reward those whose knowledge production contributes to elite power…That same system diminishes the production of potentially transgressive political knowledge by questioning its 'objective' status or 'scientific' value." The participation of radical intellectuals in academic institutions actually "strengthens [those institutions] by allowing them to make hegemonic claims to fostering 'academic freedom,' a 'marketplace of ideas,' and rational neutrality…" (James and Gordon 2008, 367-9). This perilous position, James and Gordon argue, can only be remedied by exiting the academy and establishing solidarities with oppressed peoples organizing against the system (even if one keeps one's 'day job' as a teacher and researcher within the academy). Whether or not one accepts their conclusion, one can take their description of the situation of the activist scholar

and apply it to critical information literacy, whose practitioners should always be aware of the reifying and recuperative functions of information literacy in the academy. Eisenhower and Smith have argued along similar lines, as I indicated above, but they believe that librarians may be in a position from which to exercise a greater freedom of action vis-a-vis the pressures to conform, by virtue of their marginal or liminal position within the academy. Although librarians' status varies very widely across academia, and it is therefore difficult to make such generalizations, the opening they suggest is nonetheless one that all librarians should seek, whatever their situations may be. (Eisenhower and Smith 2009)

As long as we recognize the structural function of information and knowledge in our pedagogy, we can help bridge the gap between academia and the struggle for social justice. With respect to this goal, using the term 'information ecosystem', as the Framework does, is not helpful. I recognize that the term has entered our daily vocabulary, but whether one intends to or not, the term works to reify information, despite the first frame's title, "Authority is Constructed and Contextual." And even though the term stresses the rapidly changing nature of that system, it does not emphasize its artificiality and arbitrariness, that it is a reflection of a specific distribution of power. To describe natural processes requires a comprehension of complex and often rapid changes. But changes in knowledge are anything but natural. In the pages of this journal Joshua Beatty has pointed out the Framework's "neoliberal underpinnings" (something it shares in common with the Standards). He usefully traces the history of using ecological language such as 'information ecosystem' to describe social forces to the business world of the 1990s, when today's neoliberal order took shape. Beatty convincingly links this naturalized language to a revived social Darwinism in which only fittest survive in a cutthroat world of brutal competition. We are competing with others to acquire and produce the best information possible, and it is up to us (and our helpers, teachers and librarians), to acquire the necessary skills and smarts to do this. (Beatty 2014, 10-11) When we unwittingly adopt this language to describe the learning processes that we wish to encourage, we may be leaving fundamental neoliberal premises unquestioned.

While the framework does an admirable job of showing how threshold concepts can help shift information literacy toward a pedagogy that stresses the development of self-critical and self-conscious learning in the student, it does not state as its goal the formation of possible solidarities for the student to help change the information system itself, nor the hierarchies of knowledge and status within academia. Furthermore, by continuing to stress the individual learner, it obscures the fact that any real change would actually require *collective* understanding and action rather than individualized learning. In this way the Framework continues to do the work that the Standards were doing all along. But the vital difference between the two, perhaps, is the enhanced opportunities for critical interventions that the Framework provides and even encourages. ((Beatty, in fact, is another critical librarian who acknowledges that "there are many ways in which the Framework significantly improves on the Standards." (Beatty 2014, 4)))

From a critical information literacy perspective, then, it appears that the specific type of information literacy advocated by the Framework is one which accepts the existence of a particular regime of knowledge, and demands that we as librarians focus our energies on making students and faculty competent citizens of that regime, even if dynamic, critical, and progressive ones. Here again we are faced with the dilemma outlined above: students have immediate needs to be met – they are working on research papers, projects, reports, and theses. They not only need information and sources, and to learn how to conduct research, they also need to master the conceptual frameworks that will enable them to effectively and convincingly make persuasive arguments. All of this very sophisticated and complex instruction needs to be done in a short space of time. Librarians have to help so many of them, with insufficient resources, and not enough time. Where can an information literacy that raises an awareness of the contingent and arbitrary nature of the information system, be fit? When does it take place? Can something like ACRL's Framework possibly incorporate such a vision without undermining itself?

The answers to these questions are varied and complex, and they are being explored by the many librarians who theorize and practice critical information literacy. They have taught us that we must assume a position of resistance rather than conformity to the existing information regime, if we wish to see it changed at all. Part of the solution has to do with the content of library instruction. For instance, in teaching specific research or searching skills, the examples that we use in the classroom and at the reference desk can provide opportunities to question information regimes in more systematic ways. ((For examples of this see Hicks 2013; Adler 2013; Tewell 2014.)) Another part has to do with our everyday practice as librarians, inside and outside of the classroom. We can find a long tradition of resistance on the part of librarians, not only against the banning of books or spying by the government, but also against the very structure of information and knowledge that they are supposed to be the guides for unlocking. ((I cite here as likely the most well-known example the legendary Sanford Berman. A general history of librarians and resistance, not only in the United States but globally, has yet to be written. Such a narrative would be useful for our present struggles since sometimes it seems that librarians believe that only recently has the library been challenged as a supposedly 'neutral' grounds for the discovery of knowledge. But librarians have been doing so since at least the 1930s. There are of course some excellent studies that are focused in scope, but very instructive for for this purpose: see especially, Samek 2001; Olson 2001; Kagan 2015. Also helpful is the archive of the ALA Social Responsiblities Roundtable Newsletter and the archive of the blog *Library Juice*)) Resistance is shown by librarians who take proactive measures in pushing for open access, calling out or refusing rapacious vendor contracts, or finding ways to actually make our profession more diverse, just to name a few areas. But what does resistance in information literacy instruction look like? I think we will see more creative examples in the coming years, thanks, ironically perhaps, to the Framework, which, as I stated at the outset, has opened up the possibilities for action and maneuver on the part of instruction librarians, despite its ideological baggage. In this sense it is a progressive document, but it will require librarians

to resist it in order for it to become a radical one.

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