

MARKETING INFORMATION LITERACY

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In 2012, more than a decade after the original ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (hereafter the Standards) were institutionalized as the goal of academic library instruction, the Information Literacy Competency Standards Review Task Force convened by ACRL recommended in a memo that the Standards “should not be approved as they exist but should be extensively revised” (ACRL, 2012, p. 1). More recent models of information literacy informed this decision, as well as “changes in technology, scholarly communication, and the information life cycle” (p. 2). It is clear, the memo asserted, that “the scope of literacy is changing and we must respond” (p. 4). As a critic of the original Standards, I was pleased to hear that they would be revisited and revamped. The 1999 document conceptualized information literacy as universalizing and apolitical, reiterated dominant discourses around the information society, and elided inequities in information access and creation. The individual standards, indicators, and outcomes failed to articulate the processes that lead to information literacy, relied on conventional notions of objectivity and authority, ignored the politics of knowledge production, and represented the information landscape as natural and inevitable. Ultimately, I argued, the Standards promulgated an uncritical consumption of information in lieu of any sort of systemic critique.

The revised Standards have obviously not yet been published, and it does not appear that they will be until 2014. Nonetheless, two documents that hint at the shape of the revised Standards have been released: the aforementioned memo submitted by the Task Force to the ACRL Information Literacy Standards Committee (ACRL, 2012; hereafter “memo”), and more

recently, “A Prospectus for Revision,” submitted by the co-chairs of the Task Force (ACRL, 2013; hereafter “prospectus”). These documents do seem to indicate that the revised Standards will address some of my earlier critiques. Both refer to other approaches to information literacy—the model developed by SCONUL, metaliteracy, and transliteracy—that do not depict information literacy as either a series of benchmarks, or as centered on libraries and library resources as authoritative and objective entities. The prospectus specifically rejects the format of the original Standards; it “proposes a philosophical approach to preparing a new model that will, in effect, not reproduce the standards-like inventory of the 1999 document, but will instead offer a conceptual approach” (2013, p. 1). The revised Standards will not be “a detailed listing of skills, but rather a set of archetypal or core abilities” (2013, p. 1), and flexibility will be emphasized. The prospectus even goes so far as to renounce the notion that this “flexible entity” should even be conceptualized as “a set of standards” (2013, p. 2). Moreover, the revision will explicitly incorporate “a section on critical abilities, which will be expanded from traditional information literacy skills” (2013, p. 2). These documents suggest that the revised Standards will move towards articulating the processes that lead to information literacy; towards a sense of openness, rather than the foreclosure of possibilities; and away from a focus on linearity, tool use, and conventionally authoritative information sources. These sorts of revisions will do much to mitigate some of the weaknesses in the original Standards.

While these changes are certainly welcome, I am also troubled by what these documents reveal. I realize that they do not necessarily

articulate or even allude to all of the potential changes, but I do assume they will structure this revision to at least some extent. It is not, then, clear whether the revised Standards will approach knowledge production and the information landscape as natural and therefore inevitable, or as constructed and subject to human agency. It is not clear if the revised Standards will continue to understand information as transparent and either bad or good, based on some external, albeit non-library in this instance, authority. The prospectus describes a “section on critical abilities” (2013, p. 2): does this imply they are not perceived as foundational and essential to the entirety of the project? I fear the revised Standards will replicate these positions of the original Standards, because they are easy to grasp, explain, and impart, and they are reassuringly concrete. It is easier to not engage in an ongoing critique of the embeddedness of knowledge production and consumption and indeed, our own work, within social, economic, historical, and political contexts.

This critique is urgently necessary in this historical moment, however. In my earlier work, I pointed to how the definition of information literacy in the original Standards is ostensibly apolitical, but performs political work by propagating dominant discourses around the information society, which erase real inequities in information access and creation. The memo and prospectus unquestioningly and perhaps even more forcefully reproduce this position. The memo asserts that “technology has enabled all citizens to produce media” (2012, p. 3), and that “[t]he online environment has democratized the creation and curation of personal information collections” (2012, p. 6). While these sorts of statements are ubiquitous, they are fundamentally false; while 85% of

American adults do use the internet, there are still roughly 36 million adults who do not (Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, 2013a). And the people less likely to use the internet are those who are already marginalized in some way: the poor, the elderly, those who live in rural areas, and those without high school educations (Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, 2013b). Is the problem, then, solely that of too much information and more and more new technologies? Disempowered people are once again expunged, as they were in the original Standards, from the rationale for the revised Standards and thus most likely from the revised Standards themselves. The memo adopts a studied apolitical stance throughout: “technology,” “the online environment,” and “the information life cycle” are seemingly able to enact change of their own volition, while “literacies are being reshaped and adjusted” somehow (2012, p. 3-4). But there are actors behind these changes—they are neither natural nor inevitable—and these erasures of both actors and agency are political acts that reinforce specific power relations. This rhetoric reveals assumptions in the framing of both the problem of information literacy and the solution of the revised Standards. This solution is assumed to be something measurable and assessable, and moreover, that it should and can only be something measurable and assessable. However, these notions, too, have a genealogy and engage in ideological work; standards and assessment have historically been deployed to specific political ends. The uncritical acquiescence to the discourses around the information society within the memo and prospectus constrains the revised Standards to the problem and solution of the original Standards. There is essentially no questioning of anything beyond the format of the original Standards, which, perhaps

not coincidentally, is easy to address. This is a project that seeks to promote the development of critical abilities, but it uncritically adopts the very thing that it is setting out to (critically) reevaluate.

The memo and prospectus work to disavow the political stakes embedded in and the material consequences of this specific vision of information literacy. The information society is not solely characterized by the ubiquity of information and communication technologies, as these documents would suggest, but also by the adoption of neoliberal policies such as the disinvestment in and the marketization/privatization of formerly public goods such as education. Not surprisingly, the logic of the market also pervades these documents. The emphasis on accountability, assessment, and measurable standards, as educational theorists such as Henry Giroux and David Hursh have argued, is rooted in neoliberal ideology. This application of market logic to arenas that were formerly understood as outside of markets has become rote only within the past thirty-five years, but because it is so pervasive, it generally goes unquestioned. In a seemingly insignificant but telling example, the prospectus continually uses the term “product” to refer to the revised Standards. Similarly, the memo refers to the SCONUL model, metaliteracy, and transliteracy, which were created by groups or individuals working within higher education, and in the same fashion, as though it were transparent, cites a white paper from the Aspen Institute. This paper contends:

This work [on developing digital and media literacy] will depend on the active support of many stakeholders: educational leaders at the local, state and federal levels; trustees of public libraries; leaders of community-

based organizations; state and federal officials; members of the business community; leaders in media and technology industries, and the foundation community. (Hobbs, 2010, p. vii)

The board of the Aspen Institute, in addition to a few academics and former or current government officials, primarily consists of high-level managers, CEOs, founders of multinational corporations and finance groups, and venture capitalists. It is not unexpected, then, that this group believes the business community and media industry are key stakeholders in education; in neoliberalism, economic value is the only value, and this applies to education as well. But should these groups be central to or even driving these conversations? Should market logic be applied to higher education? There may well be librarians who would answer yes to these questions, but these questions are not even asked.

Like the memo and prospectus, the Aspen Institute white paper deploys discourses of the information society:

Most American families live in “constantly connected” homes with 500+ TV channels, broadband Internet access, and mobile phones offering on-screen, interactive activities at the touch of a fingertip. In an age of information overload, people need to allocate the scarce resource of human attention to quality, high-value messages that have relevance to their lives. (Hobbs, 2010, p. vii)

These days, across a wide range of socioeconomic strata, the “soccer mom” has been replaced by the “technology mom” who purchases a

Leapfrog electronic toy for her baby, lap-surfs with her toddler, buys a Wii, an xBox and a Playstation for the kids and their friends, puts the spare TV set in the child's bedroom, sets her child down for hours at a time to use social media like Webkinz and Club Penguin, and buys a laptop for her pre-teen so she will not have to share her own computer with the child. (Hobbs, 2010, p. 26)

Neoliberal policies, as implemented in the United States over the past thirty-five years, have resulted in increased economic inequality (see, for example, Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality), and these changes cannot simply be attributed to changes in technology and the emergence of the internet. The memo, prospectus, and white paper vigorously work to hide the at least 36 million exceptions to this new and seemingly wonderful world of constant connectivity, abundant information, and material comfort. They obscure the very real issues around information access for those in poverty and even deny that poverty truly exists; can anyone claim to be poor if they have 500 TV channels, a home computer, a mobile device, a Wii, an xBox, a Playstation? These discursive erasures collude in neoliberal ideology and work to naturalize it as simply the way things are, and should be, and have always been.

In the summer of 2012, Teresa Sullivan was forced to resign as president of the University of Virginia (UVA). A board member of the Darden School of Business at UVA explained Sullivan's resignation in an email:

The decision of the Board Of Visitors to move in another direction

stems from their concern that the governance of the University was not sufficiently tuned to the dramatic changes we all face: funding, Internet, technology advances, the new economic model. These are matters for strategic dynamism rather than strategic planning. (Vaidhyanathan, 2012).

I do not think it is accidental that the memo similarly reasons that change must happen because changes are happening. In this rhetoric, these changes are unprecedented and unstoppable. They are not the results of specific policies or actions, but are rather the inevitable outcomes of technological progress, which is inescapable and uncontrollable. There is no room for agency and no sense of other possibilities.

In the last decade, however, changes in technology, scholarly communication, and the information life cycle have contributed to the changing face of information literacy in higher education. (2012, p. 2)

Clearly, the scope of literacy is changing and we must respond. (2012, p. 4) Aaron Bady (2013) identifies this sense of urgency, this compressed temporality, and this technodeterminist language in recent rhetoric around MOOCs—"In the MOOC moment," he says, "it's already too late, *always* already too late. The world not only *will* change, but it *has changed*"—and argues that it performs political work:

We don't have to understand why it's happening, where it's going, or where it came from; the fact that it's happening *there* is all the reason we need. Framed by this temporality, the MOOC becomes a kind of fetish object: because we treat its existence

as self-evident fact—or to the extent that we treat its existence as a kind of self-evident fact—its objective reality obscures the contingencies of its production and the ideological formations that make it seem to exist. (Bady, 2013)

The memo functions in essentially the same way in regards to the problem of information literacy and the solution of the Standards; the fundamental constructedness and ideological origins of both are obscured, while neoliberal attitudes towards higher education are reified as natural. The forced resignation of Sullivan; the hype around MOOCs; the bill introduced in the California Senate that would force public universities to accept credits from for-profit MOOC providers, thereby transferring public funds to private corporations; for-profit Coursera contracting with public universities; Georgia Tech's online master's program funded by AT&T; faculty backlash to similar initiatives at San Jose State University, Amherst, and Duke: These recent events exemplify the application of market logic to higher education. The library community has largely refrained from any sort of critique of these issues and events, and in the case of the memo and prospectus here, has adopted the ideology that underlies the privatization and marketization of higher education without any sort of critical examination. Is this sort of ideology compatible with our mission? I do not believe that it is, but more significantly, there has been no conversation around these issues, no interrogation of the political aspects of our work, no questioning of the assumptions embedded in the ways we theorize our work. The individuals raising these sorts of questions around higher education and technology, like Aaron Bady, Siva Vaidhyanathan, Evgeny Morozov, and Audrey Watters, are also our

colleagues, but the library community only seems to speak and listen to ourselves. I contend that we do so at the peril of the institutions we work within, our profession, and our mission, which has never been primarily about profit.

The prospectus suggests that the original Standards “foreclosed deepened collaboration with faculty, information technologists, teaching and learning centers, and others who need to be brought into the conversation” (2013, p. 1). In contrast, the revised Standards “will promote collaboration, enhance program planning, and provide a richer vocabulary and set of tools for those working together” (2013, p. 2). The importance of collaboration is emphasized, but what can that mean in a context in which the problem and solution are overdetermined? I appreciate the need to articulate our instructional work, but we need to interrogate what we understand that work to be. We must unpack the political stakes of that articulation. Once we move away from having already decided as to the shape of both the problem and solution, we can begin to ask questions: Will the revised Standards, perhaps consisting of abilities such as “search” and “create,” adequately represent what we do? Because these abilities are obviously not solely (or even to a great extent) the responsibility of librarians, will such a model have any more resonance or traction with collaborators outside the library? Are we clear on the content matter and processes that we do teach? The Standards have always been about the outcomes of that instruction throughout an individual's life, rather than the immediate content of it, but perhaps that might be an easier place to begin this articulation. In this area, I see a lot of promise in the approach of Lori Townsend, Korey Brunetti, and Amy R. Hofer, who have written extensively about the threshold

concepts of library and information science. The threshold concepts that they have outlined also compel us to consider the politics of not only the information landscape, but also of how we understand and approach that landscape. That approach must be more politically engaged, perhaps similar to that of the American Historical Association, which *begins* its discussion of assessment with an historically informed critique. We do need to think strategically about how we convey our mission and work to individuals and institutions outside of the library, but this does not mean we should think uncritically. Neoliberal ideology, discourses of the information society, and technofetishism appear as unexamined, pre-given assumptions in the documents surrounding the revision of the Standards, and this unthinking parroting undercuts not just the Standards, but more broadly, the goals of both libraries and universities. It invokes and legitimizes political positions that have historically been hostile to these goals. Most insidiously, it forecloses even the consideration of alternative policies, practices, and worlds. Is this the sort of work we want to do?

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