

Two Decades of Critical Information Literacy: A Review and Analysis of the Literature

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Critical information literacy (CIL) uses teaching and learning in libraries to understand and act upon oppression in information systems. Over the past 20 years critical information literacy has been explored, refined, debated, and critiqued. What can the recent literature tell us about the direction of CIL and critical librarianship more broadly? This research explores CIL's recent past through an analysis of 128 publications from 2016 to 2024 and four thematic areas. Lastly, this article identifies issues and failings of CIL and considers what should come next as a theory and practice that seeks to move information literacy toward more liberatory aims.¹

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, 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 and learners to seek to democratize knowledge and access to information. 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).

This research study seeks to answer two questions:

1. What themes are present in the current CIL literature?
2. Based on the current CIL literature, what areas and perspectives are lacking or underrepresented?

Twenty years after CIL's initial appearances in the literature, it has been the subject of many works theorizing, 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 their specific settings and specialties, providing useful nuance and insight. Despite its advances CIL has remained limited in consequential ways, including an inattention to race and White

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supremacy; lack of recognizing labor and working conditions as a fundamental aspect of teaching in libraries; North America-centric representation and interests; and a focus on and within higher education, which limits CIL's broader potential and applicability. First, a brief look at critical information literacy's foundational years will provide context.

Background

Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Early 2000s–2015

Critical information literacy has accumulated a considerable presence in the library and information science literature, as well as at conferences, especially in North America. As such, the literature and particularly early works in CIL are North America-centric. Foundations of the early 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 that accounts for political and ethical issues in information environments. 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 analyze information literacy and the educational work of libraries. However, as early as the cornerstone volume edited by Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier, *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (2010), inspiration for reimagining information literacy took many forms, which included queer, feminist, and critical race pedagogies. Highlighting the links between information literacy and social justice, Higgins and Gregory's edited volume *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* (2013) extended the conversation with 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, regarding 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 into 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 afterward considerable work expanded CIL's theoretical inspirations, from Greek theories of time to critical geography to media studies (Drabinski, 2017; Nicholson, 2018; Tewell, 2017). Now, 20 years after CIL's initial appearances in the literature, it has been the subject of many additional works theorizing it, translating it into classroom practice, and providing long overdue critique.

Method

Critical Information Literacy Literature: 2016 to Present

To locate the critical information literacy literature that has been published since a 2015 review conducted by Tewell, searches of three databases including Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA); Library and Information Science Source (LISS); and Google Scholar were conducted. The LISA and LISS databases were selected due to their focus on

library and information science, a field in which CIL has been established as a concept and practice. Google Scholar was selected due to its broad indexing and search algorithm that contrasts significantly with subscription databases to increase the likelihood of locating publications not discoverable within LISA and LISS. Search terms included “critical information literacy,” “critical pedagogy and libraries,” “critical literacy and libraries,” and “critical library instruction.” Additionally, controlled vocabularies were used in LISA and LISS, as well as the “cited by” and “related articles” functions in Google Scholar, to identify relevant publications. Once these 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 geographic 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. For example, Cherian et al. (2022) surveyed academic librarians working in the state of Kerala, India, regarding their attitudes toward critical information literacy and critical librarianship, while Santos (2024) reflects on critical information literacy’s evolution and application in the Philippines. Crilly (2024) reviews case studies of critically informed actions in academic libraries that encompasses antiracism and decolonization with an emphasis on the United Kingdom, and Manhique et al. (2023) surveyed Portuguese- and English-language literature on critical information literacy literature up to 2021.

Research

Publication Trends

To provide insight into when and where publications were completed, the year of publication, number of CIL publications by country, and type of publication were calculated. Year of publication (see Figure 1) and type of publication (see Figure 2) were identified

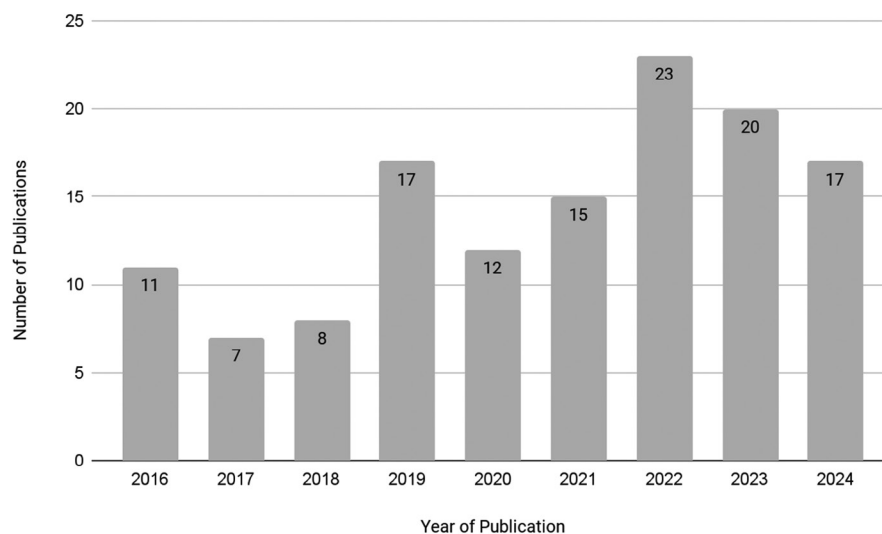


Figure 1. CIL Publications by Year, 2016–2024

FIGURE 2 CIL Publications by Type	
Publication Type	Number of Publications
Journal article	101
Book chapter	11
Conference proceeding	9
Book	4
Thesis/Dissertation	2
Encyclopedia article	1

using citation information, while the publications by country category (see Figure 3) was based on an author’s country of residence using the 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.

In addition to the above summaries, the journals that most frequently published articles on CIL-related topics were identified. A total of 56 distinct journals published at least one article on critical information literacy between 2016 and 2024, and 12 journals published two or more articles related to CIL. A summary of CIL article publications by number of appearances in a given journal is included as Figure 4.

Themes

Thematic areas were developed by reviewing article titles and abstracts in a spreadsheet and then assigning each publication keywords that described its primary topics or focus. This same review was conducted a second time with the dual goals of creating more generalizable themes and consolidating topics (as long as a publication topic remained accurately represented). This resulted in eight thematic areas which, for better conceptual clarity, were grouped under four larger thematic categories that encompassed the subthemes. The identified themes include 1) Conceptualizing and Theorizing; 2) Pedagogy and Teaching Practices; 3) Responding to Contemporary Politics and Technologies; and 4)

FIGURE 3 CIL Publications by Country	
Country	Number of Publications
United States	60
United Kingdom	19
Brazil	14
Canada	13
Croatia	8
Sweden	6
China	3
Spain	3
Nigeria	2
South Africa	2
Finland	1
India	1
Mozambique	1
Philippines	1
Serbia	1

FIGURE 4 CIL Article Publications by Journal	
Journal	Number of Publications
<i>Journal of Information Literacy</i>	15
<i>Communications in Information Literacy</i>	12
<i>Information Research</i>	5
<i>Journal of Documentation</i>	5
<i>In the Library with the Lead Pipe</i>	3
<i>The International Review of Information Ethics</i>	3
<i>Reference Services Review</i>	3
<i>College & Research Libraries</i>	2
<i>Em Questão</i>	2
<i>Journal of Academic Librarianship</i>	2
<i>Journal of Academic Libraries</i>	2
<i>Journal of Librarianship and Information Science</i>	2

FIGURE 5
CIL Literature Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Conceptualizing and Theorizing	
	Considering the Bounds of Critical Information Literacy
	Applying Models Outside of Library Science
	Investigating Information Practices
Pedagogy and Teaching Practices	
	Specific Teaching Practices
	Applications for Scholarly Disciplines
Responding to Contemporary Politics and Technologies	
	Disinformation, Post-Truth, and Democracy
	Emerging Technologies
Critiquing Critical Information Literacy	

Critiquing Critical Information Literacy. A summary of the themes and subthemes is included as Figure 5, and each theme is later explored in more detail.

Conceptualizing and Theorizing

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 could inform LIS research and practice. A number of researchers have recently studied how information literacy is presented through discourse analysis and related approaches (Bezerra & Beloni, 2019; Johansson & Limberg, 2017; Multas & Hirvonen, 2019; Seale, 2016; Walton & Cleland, 2017), and challenges to its adoption and recognition in present-day information environments (Haider & Sundin, 2022a; Hicks, 2024; Oliphant, 2021; Šobota, 2024; Šobota, 2023), as well as examining its theoretical foundations and contributions (Bezerra, 2021; Flierl & Maybee, 2020; Špiranec, 2018; Webber & 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 offer a useful decolonial reading of information literacy as a project and product of empire (2024).

Studies that apply models or ways of thinking outside of library science to information literacy represent a second component of the Conceptualizing and Theorizing theme. These represent a wide range of theories, adopted for their conceptual, as well as practical, implications. These works draw upon literacies in other fields, including rhetoric and composition studies (Baer, 2016; Chiewphasa & Sisk, 2022; Doyle, 2019; Johansson, 2023; Kuglitsch, 2018; Pavelić & Špiranec, 2021; Zanin-Yost & 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); antiapartheid activism (Schneider & Bastos, 2021); and critical theories including anticolonialism, Black feminist theory, feminism, and

Marxism (Tanus & Gomes, 2024; Moreno, 2023; Doyle & Brisola, 2022; Schneider & Bezerra, 2023).

Research that investigates different populations' information practices as they relate to critical information literacy are also present in the recent literature. This research studies job categories or workers more broadly (e.g., social workers) (Sharun, 2023), or how workers use information in protection of their rights (Šobota & Špiranec, 2022). 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 & Sundin, 2022b); and the personal dynamics between information literacy and citizenship (Clouesley, 2021).

Pedagogy and Teaching Practices

Many practitioner-researchers are integrating theory with practice by applying critical information literacy to their work, which represents many different areas of focus and interest. The Pedagogy and Teaching Practices theme consists of two subthemes: Specific Teaching Practices, which includes numerous articles and two edited volumes; and Applications for Scholarly Disciplines.

Seeking to share how they, and potentially other library workers, can adopt critical approaches to information literacy, many authors have described using CIL in formal learning settings. These topics include specific subjects and settings that range from using maps to ask questions about how power and control is exerted (Hebert & Laddusaw, 2020; Tranfield, 2019), to teaching online information retrieval using a social justice lens (Sinnamon et al., 2024), with many others sharing sites of inspiration for their teaching as well (Brayton & Casey, 2019; Cai'e & Lifeng, 2022; Campbell, 2023; Fritch, 2018; Steinberg, 2020; McDowell & Vetter, 2022). Collaborations between librarians and teaching faculty represent another area of interest in the literature (Bartow & Mann, 2020; Mecnas et al., 2021; Paterson & Gamtso, 2023; Torrell, 2020), alongside the related topics of outreach and community collaboration (Brewster et al., 2021; Irving, 2020; Smith, 2018). Additional specific teaching practices offered include applying professional frameworks (Bauder & Rod, 2016; Branch, 2019; Mohamed, 2019); possibilities and limitations of CIL in the context of capitalism (Ellenwood, 2020; Espinel & Tewell, 2023); and critical pedagogy in graduate-level library and information science courses (Cooke, 2020; Rapchak, 2021). Other authors critically examine instruction models (Nicholson, 2016; Pho et al., 2022) and the increasing presence of online CIL instruction (Saroza, 2023; Withorn, 2023).

The edited volumes *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* (Brookbank & Haigh, 2021), and *Critical Literacy for Information Professionals* (McNicol, 2016) collect chapters on critical information literacy practice and theories in addition to including a wealth of ideas for classroom implementation. Notably, all the mentioned publications represent higher education contexts. Only two publications concerning teaching practices relate to public libraries; these address 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).

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). Other research has explored 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). Critical information literacy has also been applied to specific disciplinary courses, in the cases of engineering (Kastner & Cheng, 2019), legal research (Ward, 2022), public health (Linares-Gray, 2022), neuroscience (Gold & Leininger, 2022), and visual art (Beatty & Hernandez Jr., 2019). Undertaking a study that interviewed academic researchers concerning possibilities for critical information literacy in decolonizing 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).

Responding to Contemporary Politics and Technologies

Critical information literacy 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.

Concerning the subtheme of Disinformation, Post-Truth, and Democracy, critical information literacy has been proposed as an effective means of teaching how to evaluate online sources, especially the proliferation of “fake news,” mis-information, and disinformation (Brisola & 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” in defense of social justice and human rights to more effectively respond to hate speech and disinformation (Cuevas-Cerveró et al. 2023; Martínez-Ávila & Cuevas-Cerveró, 2022) and to adopt “revolutionary information literacy” as a way to contend with capitalist systems that promote disinformation (LaDue, 2024). Other researchers 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 lessening the digital divide (Liao & Tian, 2022; Figueiredo & Borges, 2021). Critical information literacy’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, as well as how critical information literacy can be used to spur collective action. Similarly, 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 researchers view from a variety of perspectives. Researchers have applied critical information literacy 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 &

Sundin, 2021; Lloyd, 2019); data visualization and time-based bias and politics (Johansson & Steglund, 2021); the massive growth in data and data infrastructure (Špiranec, 2019); participatory web environments (Špiranec, 2016); creating a training program for European librarians to address emerging digital challenges (García-Quismondo, 2024); and, most recently, generative artificial intelligence applications (Wang et al., 2024).

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, as CIL research has remained a largely White and North American endeavor. It is perhaps not surprising that, while racism and cultural imperialism should be major concerns of CIL, they remain under-discussed and largely unattended to. This preserves the existing power relations that, in principle, CIL seeks to disrupt. Some research has interrogated CIL's contradictions and shortcomings across various lines.

CIL has always recognized the importance of critique as applied to libraries and information systems, but it took over 15 years for considerable critique of CIL itself to emerge. Leung and López-McKnight (2020) have critiqued CIL's inattention to racialized oppression and White supremacy, which have been strikingly underexplored in its theory and practice. Other critiques oriented toward critical librarianship and CIL were published in the same special journal issue reflecting on the volume *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (2010). This special issue included Feretti's (2020) consideration of critical library work's failings when extended past the classroom into the workplace and one's relationships with colleagues, as well as Seale's (2020) identification of the institutionalization of critical librarianship and the management of critique that comes with widespread acceptance, leading to depoliticization. Relatedly, Tanus (2022) explores the "social institutionalisation" of progressive and critical librarianship using 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 the critical information literacy literature at large (Smith & 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 & Kamper, 2023). Further examinations of labor, power, and critical library pedagogy have been undertaken by Mirza et al. (2023), who suggest that CIL discourses of agency and empowerment inadvertently emphasize individualism instead of collective action, and argue that meaningful recognition of library labor is a key component of any meaningful pedagogy.

CIL Issues and Failings

This review of the literature reveals several prominent interests in critical information literacy research, but what and who is underrepresented or absent from the literature altogether is equally important to consider. Critical information literacy currently lacks attention to certain

essential topics, including race and labor. CIL's lack of focus on race and White supremacy is particularly troubling given library and information science's history and demographics. Inadequate recognition of labor and working conditions as a fundamental aspect of information literacy is another failing. Additionally, the critical information literacy 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 further 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 which is, in North America, predominantly White, and which must reckon with its past and present complicity in upholding systems of racialized 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). This complicity reflects libraries' histories and embeddedness within American society. While there are numerous examples of resistance to systems of White supremacy, libraries often reflect the dominant paradigm (Selby, 2019; Malone, 2015).

The overall lack of acknowledgment of race in CIL discussions is highly problematic as it signifies such issues are not a primary concern and thus reinforces the underlying ideologies of White supremacy. Another question is what impact would be made if CIL researchers did in fact center and confront racism as demanding urgency and action. While this would represent a necessary corrective in the literature, without action it would still lack 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[s] the reification of White Supremacy" (p. 16). To begin to engage with systems of oppression in information platforms and practices, critical information literacy must meaningfully address White supremacy and the legacies and continued presence of racism in libraries and information literacy.

Labor

The critical information literacy literature also largely fails to meaningfully discuss labor 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, particularly 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 labor 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). cline and López-McKnight also identify this thread of individualism—and the result of critical information literacy and information literacy more broadly—as “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). 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 savior assumptions and narratives (Mirza et al., 2023).

An inattention to labor in the literature also represents a missed opportunity in identifying and making meaningful connections with learners, as well as other workers. In identifying how to address the challenges that capitalism poses to critical information literacy 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 critical information literacy’s shortcomings in changing the workplace, its centering 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 critical information literacy literature is highly influenced by, and often produced using, viewpoints that prioritize Western and Eurocentric perspectives. Lloyd draws attention to this, suggesting that

IL as it is currently presented is an anglicized concept which centralizes 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 authorized 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 even more important that additional perspectives—including recognizing the fact that learners always bring with them their own information literacy knowledge and practices—are actively involved in CIL theory and practice.

While the existing literature is steeped in Western-centric views and mostly originates from the Global North, a welcomed development is that more researchers from outside of North America are making substantive contributions to CIL conversations, especially those based in Brazil. As CIL grows increasingly examined and applied internationally, it is important to remain attentive to the potentially imperialistic nature of “exporting” critical information literacy with lack of regard for context, as argued by Pilerot and Lindberg in their analysis of international policy documents concerning information literacy (2011). 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. Instead, the concept and practice of information literacy should be used in the plural, as “information literacies ... invites more than one exclusive interpretation of what it means” (Pilerot & Lindberg, 2011, p. 356). While CIL presently lacks a robust knowledge base outside of Western systems, it is an area that appears to be improving.

Higher Education Focus

An overwhelming number of critical information literacy researchers and practitioners are based in higher education. CIL has a more academic orientation than some other subfields of information literacy, which are often more likely to consider information practices outside of academe and as it occurs in informal learning settings. CIL’s relationship to information literacy more broadly follows a similar trajectory, especially as it relates to higher education; however, it 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: one article encouraging public library workers to adopt CIL pedagogy in their work with people who are incarcerated (Hancock, 2021); and one thesis on critical public librarianship, especially as it relates to library collections (Garrett, 2020).

Writing about critical librarianship, Beilin observes that “the association of critical librarianship 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 toward 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 the workplace, informal learning, civic engagement, engaging with digital information platforms, and many other places.

Conclusion

Critical information literacy seeks to understand oppression as it occurs within, and is perpetuated by, libraries and information systems; ultimately, it advocated 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 critical information literacy continue 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. Much critical information literacy practice 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 can be argued that 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 grave ethical and environmental concerns, CIL itself cannot solve any widespread problems. However, it does hold potential for meaningfully addressing them in teaching and learning settings, especially when a critical lens is applied to present-day information tools and environments (Pho & Tranfield, 2024; Zvyagintseva & 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 toward causes such as antiracism and antisexism, those who research and practice critical information literacy can learn from activist and social justice movements. It is a significant first step to surface CIL-related issues through scholarship and teaching; however, 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 organize 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). Establishing analyses of power closer to home, within workplaces and local communities, is key to realizing CIL’s aims.

Finally, it is important to consider critical information literacy as not static and unchanging, but instead as “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 which, in its current formations, too often reinforces the very systems of racism and eurocentrism it seeks to interrupt. Yet by drawing upon the research done to explore critical information literacy and expand our understandings of information—including whether it is even possible to move information literacy toward a more liberatory future—the best chance for meaningful critical information literacy theory and practice is to take up this work together.

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