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Relationality Over Neutrality

On Technology

Kailyn Slater

Articulations of librarianship's lack of neutrality have burgeoned in the last twenty years.[1] These articulations challenge both system and service: institutions that employ us are not neutral, and neither are the effects that we have in providing resources to our community.[2] This lack of neutrality also extends to our interactions with technology, including how we utilize tools and systems in the workplace, as well as how we engage with our community members regarding their use of technology. Education about technology involves deeper consideration than simply pointing out major shifts in technological paradigms; it includes grasping what those paradigm shifts mean for our pursuit of knowledge, our opportunity to engage in labor without exploitation, and the flourishing of our communities. Critical information literacy asks us to "resist the encroachment of neoliberalism….[and] instead engage directly with the major issues of violence towards women, people of color, queer people, and other marginalized populations, and with the systems of power that sanction and endorse these acts of violence."[3] In sharing resources, what is contained within those resources, who produced them, and their intended impacts, matter. How we respond when community members communicate their frustrations about technology—like being closed out of access to family photographs by forgetting a password, their difficulty in keeping up with interface shifts that create friction in applying for jobs, housing, and food assistance, and escalating inability to escape surveillance—matters.

Within library and information science (LIS), much has been published on information literacy and our ability to educate community members on the impacts that technology has on them. However, there is more to articulate, from a critical perspective, about the library worker's orientation towards their own use of technology, particularly when the profession is becoming increasingly represented as a field of information management based in computational tools. This epistemic shift within LIS produces a working environment where technological skill is expected to be attained, but barriers to entry for full-time positions are high, requiring specialization in applications that are likely acquired outside of the field. Public library workers, for example, are stretched thin, with the majority of time spent at work focused on staffing a service desk or conducting programming.[4] The time available for learning about technology varies dramatically depending on what part of the library you work in, how much funding is available for professional development, and the possibility for infrastructural support given, or not given, to public libraries within a particular American state or municipality. Those who have been lucky enough to acquire a full-time role and maintain established or tenured status may not feel the need to 'upskill' and actively engage in the technologies that library school students are told are requirements to succeed. Adjacent to librarianship, teachers face a similar, if not the same, phenomenon: "the scarce digital competence of teachers for the integration of technologies in curriculum and teaching…continues to constitute a complex and problematizing scenario that invites us to think

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and transcend the recognition of [information and communication technology] as a technical tool, toward a deeper understanding of its implications in the teaching and learning of school content."[5]

The term 'technology' can indicate any number of material apparatuses, applications, and devices that are technic. They contain a possibility of capacity and relationality through techniques that are wholly separate from humans but require human activation. Technics can be "apprehended as the horizon of all possibility to come and of all possibility of a future."[6] Technology is "method, technique, a way of making (non)sense of the world; it's fleshy and bloody and earthly and divine; a space where haunting spectra linger beyond the broken [web] link."[7] Looking at technology in this broad way, I struggle to situate generative artificial intelligence (genAI) as authentic, particularly when technology is an epistemological means of defining the material relationship between humans and machines. Technology is not meant to be entirely frictionless—it connects us to the material world around us, opening up possibilities of understanding that requires our own intention, input, and sense of ourselves. GenAI attempts to flatten the production of contained knowledge, and is posited by its progenitors as technic: as merely a tool that exponentially expands human possibility. In reality, it produces illusions and synthetic information that are meant to be elusively perceived as having veracity; meanwhile, it materially exists instead as large batches of statistics, powered by massive data centers and labeling performed by exploited workers.[8] Generative adversarial networks—the neural networks that statistically determine accuracy through the labeling of a digital object, piece of text, image, or video against existing data points—push that labeled data through training algorithms that are also steered by exploited workers that, at this point, have interacted with millions of vectors of data; many of those data points include "deeply psychologically disturbing content."[9] The commercial product that comes out of that exploitation is the fabricated video, images, and text—what's colloquially called 'slop'—shared on social media, used in classrooms, and found in lawsuits.[10] As Gebru and Torres argue, with genAI as a building block, the technology industry itself imagines an ouroboros-like future, where agentic AI–compounded systems of many large language models and synthetic media applications run society autonomously, only steered by the 'right' kinds of men.[11]

It's a lot. Understandably, it has been difficult for library workers to ascertain a solid definition of what AI is, and in doing so they tend to conflate agentic AI, machine learning, and genAI under the 'AI' umbrella. Lucy Suchman describes the "'thingness' of AI" as "work[ing] through a strategic vagueness that serves the interests of its promoters, as those who are uncertain about its referents (popular media commentators, policy makers and publics) are left to assume that others know what it is."[12] Because this vagueness collapses context and materiality, there is a need to focus on the "locations, politics, material-semiotic specificity and effects, including consequences of the ongoing enactment of AI as a singular and controversial object."[13] In service of Suchman's desire for focus, and building on the epistemological point I raised earlier, we as a discipline must consider how information as it is being represented, as well as the systems at work in producing said information, are political projects.[14] Further, technological tools and their physical materials–the wires, metal, microchips, battery power, and circuit boards–are also political projects, commercially produced because of an extensively extractive pipeline of exploitation, utilizing the energy of human workers and electrical systems.[15]

Particularly in the context of machine learning and facial recognition systems, Fabian Offert and Thao Phan are not satisfied with a simple pointing-out of a "lack—of data, of representation, of subjectivity—in machine learning systems when these systems are designed and understood to be complete representations of reality."[16] Data workers are being exploited because the technology companies want them to be. The vectors of data—frames of reference—constructed in response to

inputs to facilitate this illusion are not situated neutrally within culture, particularly when structures of power propagate its ubiquity and prevalence in society.[17] Applying an 'ethical' or 'human-centered' use frame to genAI does not eliminate its intended systemic and epistemic goal: to be representative of demarcated cultural norms that are dependent on the datasets utilized in training, and to make the information deduction process for both the creator and user without friction. The forces of work and of capital that produce generative AI, in the ways that they are producing it, are doing so intentionally. We should not be subjected to adapt to a kind of technology if it harms our ways of belonging and surviving.

Change begins with us. Organizing, storing, and providing access to information requires critical thinking among workers, and it is just as important as our ability to work with community members in development of their own critical thinking. In her work on cataloging, Emily Drabinski encourages us to "refocus attention away from the project of producing 'correct' knowledge organization systems, pointing toward a project of dialogic pedagogical interventions that push all users to consider how the organization of, and access to, knowledge is politically and socially produced."[18] Gregory Downey agrees, and pushes further: the labor of information "always takes place in, and depends on, a particular spatial/temporal and political-economic context."[19] Imagining the applications that we use on a daily basis as neutral collapses the systems that work to make those applications available to us. Those applications, and the systems behind them, ground themselves in attempts at neutrality by varying in their willingness to be transparent with customers. As Sarah Lamdan writes in *Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information*: "Data analytics companies capitalize on the invisible, ethereal products of our minds."[20] These companies "control warehouses of data and they build analytics software that transforms data into information, selling that data analytics output as well. Instead of 'big data,' data analytics companies deal in 'big information,' structured informational products extrapolated from data."[21]

This logic of neutrality fits squarely within the colonial matrix of power: a matrix that maintains the industry of technology in a position of power over users.[22] This maintenance is realized through control over information, encouraging if not enforcing surveillance, limited access to infrastructural information, a pervading sense of ubiquity based on an alienating capitalistic market, and the material presence of technology through data centers, personal computing, and commercial software applications that steer senses of belonging, ability to produce an economic income, and engage in leisure.[23] Again, I call on Sarah Lamdan:

> If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail, and if all you have is data, every problem looks like one that can be solved by data analytics, even when the problems are very human, sensitive ones involving life, liberty, and property….By dehumanizing choices that have an impact on human life, the government avoids difficult political conversations about social justice and about who deserves rights and privileges in our communities.[24]

As "knowledge creation…happens in society," LIS must be in conversation with literature across the humanities, philosophy, and science and technology studies in research and discourse.[25] Strict disciplinarity keeps us siloed and less informed about the materialities and stakes of oppressive technological systems. Many definitions of what constitutes information across disciplines and professional vocations reinforce confusion about what information is, and its possible applications, within larger sociocultural systems.[26] The role of information is multifaceted, including various ontological, epistemological, dimensional, and disciplinary considerations that have shifted and warped over time.[27] José María Díaz-Nafría has proposed an "intermediate

approach" considerate of these shifts, stipulating that it is "not necessary to consider information as something having its own entity or something [only] belonging to subjectivity, but rather in terms of a relationship."[28] This intermediate relationality is reminiscent of Stuart Hall's articulation of ideology: a way to "refer to those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence."[29] Information is a mechanism for understanding, always dependent on what it contains and how that containment is in reference to other entities.[30] How we come to understanding is dependent on ideological frames and our own absorbed constructions of knowledge.[31]

To conclude, LIS practitioners can navigate this critique of power through the idea that provenance is neither neutral nor fixed, but relational—that a 'true' owner of archival or historical material cannot only be ascertained based solely on an archivists' or institution's assertion. Within American archival theory, determining the provenance of an archival object is key in the process of forming the object's authenticity as situated within a collection, institution, or sociohistorical circumstance.[32] However, Indigenous archivists Vina Begay and Kelley Hummingbird (Klor) assert that provenance and *respect des fonds*—e.g., the principle of maintaining original order during the arrangement process–are colonial constructs that are historically and epistemologically limited based on the containment and facilitation of ownership and hierarchy, rather than a relationship supported by nonlinear ephemera, active participation, and the intentional inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems in the process of determining material authenticity.[33] Similarly, when thinking through technology as information workers, we should return to ways in which we can resist the structures that continue to reinforce colonial matrices of power. Tonia Sutherland, in her book *Resurrecting the Black Body: Race and the Digital Afterlife*, writes that in response to "Black lives, experiences, and cultural practices hav[ing] been continuously deemed the property of whiteness, wherein whiteness and white supremacy determine the conditions of legitimacy, value, and access," epistemologies and ways of organizing information do not have to operate through strict control by few.[34] Refusing these constructs is imperative, and is an operative mechanism to push back against oppression.[35] Collectivity and interdisciplinarity helps us all: through relationality, technology is not inevitable.

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