

UCLA

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

“We Must Now All Be Information Professionals”: An Interview with Ron Day

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6vm6s0cv>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 1(2)

ISSN

1548-3320

Authors

Day, Ronald E.
Pyati, Ajit K.

Publication Date

2005-06-21

DOI

10.5070/D412000554

Peer reviewed

“We Must Now All Be Information Professionals”: An Interview with Ron Day

Introduction

Ronald E. Day earned his Masters in Philosophy and his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the State University of New York at Binghamton, and an additional Masters degree in Library and Information Science from the University of California at Berkeley. He was a high school and middle school librarian for four years and a college librarian for two years. He is an Assistant Professor of Library and Information Science at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. He is the author of articles on the historical, social, and cultural contexts of documentation and information and the author of *The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History, and Power* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2001).

Ajit Pyati is a PhD student in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, Department of Information Studies. He is also a co-editor of *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*.

The following is a conversation with Ron Day, interviewed by *InterActions* co-editor Ajit Pyati. This conversation covers many areas, such as themes in *The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History, and Power*, information society rhetoric, the roles and responsibilities of librarians and other information professionals, and the role of theory in library and information science (LIS) education. At the heart of this conversation is a critical exploration of modern conceptions of information, and their relationships to professional, educational, and social practice.

AP: The fact that we are living in an information age, or what is often termed an information society, seems to be taken for granted on all levels of society, including popular, administrative, and academic circles. In addition, much of the talk about the explosive growth of information, the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs), and the growing importance of the Internet is largely enthusiastic. The popular understanding is that the information age is

upon us, and modern society as we know it is undergoing many beneficial changes.

Given these popular understandings, in what ways does a scholar critical of the construction of the present information age impact the discourse of information?

RD: The assumptions made above were certainly dominant in 1999 and 2000 when I wrote *The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History, and Power*, particularly in the San Francisco Bay region where I was living at the time and had been living for more than a decade. However, since then, and since moving to the U.S. Midwest, particularly the Detroit, Michigan area, I have to question whether these assumptions still hold and, from what my students here tell me, whether they ever were, indeed, popular assumptions in the Midwest or, at least, in Detroit. For good or bad, the notion of the information age that was prevalent in California in the above period seemed to be absent here in Detroit and perhaps in the middle part of the U.S. in general. There are attempts to start it here, both rhetorically and institutionally, but there is a lot of inertia of all sorts to contend with. “California,” at least as a modernist concept, is still the symbol of “the new” for many in the U.S. In addition, I remember traveling to the UK in the late 1990s and being told at a conference that the “information age” rhetoric which I, and other U.S. scholars at the conference were discussing, was just a rhetoric caught within U.S. ideology of the times.

So, in some ways, the rhetoric of the information age is deconstructed geographically as well as temporally, and not the least because geography—in the sense of culture—is historically inflected. This doesn’t mean that areas like Detroit do not share this modernist understanding of information, but rather, they don’t have the material conditions and the economic drives to elevate it to a rhetoric of historical determinism, at least as happened and perhaps still happens in California, which is, sort of speaking, still a somewhat mythological state surrounded by a rhetorical aura of being forward looking.

Whatever descriptive values that they may have, the phrases “information age” and “information society” may be said to be modernist tropes, part of modernist attitudes and institutional machineries. As objects of desire, information technologies have symbolic qualities as well as material qualities. This dual aspect of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in modernity make them, what I term in *The Modern Invention of Information* “informational objects”—objects that are both mediums for informing you of other things and objects that in themselves inform you. In the latter sense, what these objects inform you of is one’s place in certain social, cultural, and, literally, material

inscriptions. Discourses not only flow through ICTs, but ICTs flow through discourses. These discourses and their real world extensions give meaning to objects, including social meaning to technology.

What I tried to show in my book is how certain texts in the 20th century attempted to make knowledge, reading, conversation, and other activities “information” and informational activities. “Information” already had an older sense of being told something, being affected by something, but this was a newer sense, a sense that Heidegger captured in the term, *vorhanden*, “ready-to-hand.” “Information” in this sense is a thing, or a true representation that can be readily used (a “fact” as Otlet and others wrote). We don’t need to interpret information, we don’t need to ask how it is produced, we don’t need to ask any question of its powers; we simply need to make use of it. Information, in this sense, has connotations of efficiency and of productivity, as the documentalists such as Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet suggested. Thus, this conception presupposes frameworks of representation and networks of production in which “information” then fits within in order to acquire its meaning, value, and usefulness. The modern conception of information, thus, simultaneously both presupposes these frameworks and networks and it enacts their erasure to critical thought and to historical consciousness. “Information,” in this sense, sits counter to critical thought and is the modernist “new” par excellence. Its ideology of performative action and efficiency erases its very historical construction as a concept and all that follows from this concept. It is a “positive” sense of knowledge and expression in all the senses of the word. “Information,” in this sense, achieves a status of realism and ideology by institutionalizing and then erasing its own grounds for representation and production. It has the power of what has been called auto-affective “presence.”

Further, the cultural, and in this case, rhetorical, construction of the modern concept of “information” doesn’t take place *in* the “information age,” in as much as it *constitutes* an “information age.” “The Information Age” erases the historical construction of that “age” in a very informational and very modernist way—first of all by seeing history as “ages,” i.e., as representation. In critically examining texts that were involved in that construction and erasure I was involved in a critical “step back,” that is, I was looking at the representational construction of the real in modernity and the erasure of those constructions. The critique of the modern sense of information in the book is not just thematic, but also performative (thus, some of the difficulty some readers have found in reading the book is that it is not “informative,” that is, the text works through the rhetoric of information at the level of rhetoric, not just at the level of themes or so-called “content”—this was deliberate and unavoidable in writing a book which is a

critique of the modern sense of “information,” a sense which is very formally determinate of our culture today, including that of academic writing and publication). So, *The Modern Invention of Information* is both involved with historical recovery and with historical, social, cultural, and political critique, and as a consequence of these things it also has a level of historiographical critique, at least in regard to the traditional modes of writing history in Library and Information Science or Studies. It was written with the intention to *intervene* in various types of historical determinisms.

Originally, I had meant to include a last chapter on the work of the late conceptual artist Robert Rauschenberg. This would have revealed the critique of the aesthetics - that is, the formal qualities - of the modern sense of information and the ethical questions that surround this, which is the underlying theme of the book. I left out that chapter because I wanted a more direct, simpler book that could cross disciplinary lines more easily. However, the conclusion of the book, which is very important, brings out the main points of this missing chapter.

Now, to return to the last part of your question, in my opinion one critical project for the “information age” in the late 20th century and today is that of showing that the tropes that constitute “the information age” and “the information society” have previously occurred and that these tropes tend to appear and then disappear, until they are once again leveraged by professional, governmental, business interests, and other dominant social agents or agencies in order to foster these bodies’ agendas, but with no acknowledgment, or often even awareness, of their previous historical occurrence. The modern conception of “information,” therefore, is very strong in the “historical unconscious” that makes up what we may term “modernity.” And, of course we must recognize that there can be no historical acknowledgment of the past occurrence of “the information age” or “the information society,” for, as the definite articles of these terms suggest, the tropes of information belong to the modernist “new.”

Particularly, the tropes of the information age and information society rhetoric largely are in regard to the determinative importance of information and communication technologies and techniques (including speech and writing) in industrial, technological, and social progress, freedom of speech, globalization, political democracy, and often, liberal economic markets, many times combining all these themes. One can find these themes and their associated tropes, as I have shown, in the works of Paul Otlet, Suzanne Briet, Warren Weaver, Norbert Wiener, and in more recent work (e.g., Pierre Lévy). More or less the same tropes, again and again, constructing the narrative of an information age that is said to set us free by allowing us to “exchange” and to “have” information. Here,

the problems are the technological determinism of the arguments, on the one hand, and more problematically, the reduction of knowledge, language, affect, etc., to “information” (understood as a thing) which is the foundation for the social claims being made.

AP: Related to your critique of the modern discourse of information, your work has also highlighted the need for restoring historical agency to subjects, particularly for information professionals, at the level of history and vocabulary in the so-called information society. Please elaborate on what this project entails on a tangible level for practitioners such as librarians and other information professionals.

RD: There are many angles from which to address this question. On the one hand, the problem is that of empowering professionals with the conceptual tools to negotiate the ideological spaces in which they are positioned. The attempt of bodies such as the American Library Association (ALA) - and here I am talking in general, recognizing that there are bodies in the ALA such as the Social Responsibilities Round Table which go much further and in other directions - to do this have resulted in a survivability for the profession, but I’m not sure much more. The general rhetorical-political inscription of librarians is that of aiding “American democracy,” in being involved with “information literacy,” freedom of speech, information privacy, etc. The general idea is that American politics is fundamentally democratic and that access to information is what is needed to continue that democracy. This is a very American “Centrist” and “Right” view. More politically “Left” oriented people might see such a view of American history and politics as problematic, if not outright false. They might see American politics as a history and a current reality of struggles, both domestic and international, and they would see “information,” as well as more generally, knowledge and education as being part of those struggles. This speaks to the need of building a more “Left” oriented interpretation of “information professional,” “freedom of speech,” “information literacy,” etc., that doesn’t simply get trapped into the game of “neutral” or “objective” information delivery when what is constructed as “information” in the public sphere is anything but “neutral” or “objective.” This project becomes more necessary and urgent as what are often seen as “Left” positions in the U.S. (which in Europe, for example, might be seen as Centrist and sometimes leaning toward the Right) become almost totally absorbed and taken over by the Right and by forthright capitalist institutions and logics. As I will talk about later, the roles of the “intellectual” and that of the “information professional”—i.e., that of critically thinking and “delivering” and distributing - need to be brought closer together in reformulating both these terms,

and this merging needs to take place not just educationally and “professionally,” but more broadly in society, as well.

AP: It would seem that part of a project of restoring historical agency for information professionals requires critical thought and constructive engagement with theoretical frameworks, such as critical theory. But, given the various theory/practice antagonisms present in LIS, in what ways can information professionals utilize critical theory? In a related sense, how can critical thought be cultivated in the information professions that can engage with questions of ideology and power?

RD: Obviously, I think that one fundamental way is at the level of the critique of rhetoric and discourse, including vocabulary. Again, to take one example, I believe that the professional discourse of librarians in regard to their agency in social and political space needs more detailed examination and critique.

But, even more importantly, the problem of being an “information professional” is really, increasingly, a broadly social and personal problem, and not a problem particular to a profession, per se. I can’t say this strongly enough. If anything, the increased proliferation and yet the sophistication of information and communication technologies is making this true. And on the other hand, we are really witnessing an erosion—really, a nearly complete disappearance - of critical thought, at least in the United States, throughout all the social sectors: education, various media, administration, and needless to say, chief of all, politics and government. Even in science, explicitly ideological and fundamentalist forces are strongly at work in conditioning the possibilities for scientific work and the distribution and evaluation of the outcomes of such work. And needless to add, science education is under attack in the U.S., as well.

We should all be “information professionals” in the critical sense, but the modernist push of professionalized training and the specialization of knowledge and technique have been toward making some of us “information professionals” in a narrower, more “professional,” prescriptive sense. And while we all know that there are information professionals in this narrower sense, information and communication technologies are pushing us to the point where both the narrower and the more general senses of “information professional” flow into one another and the critical and technical-professional tasks can interfuse into one another more deeply and widely than in the past if we choose to use the technologies in a critical manner rather than being confined to the broadcast dynamics of the past 100 years.

So, obviously, I don't think one can categorically separate "professional" being from "social" and "political" being, particularly in regard to information, and especially in today's situation.

We are always *responsible*, whether we want to be or not, in a larger sense than our institutional and professional roles. That is, we are always in *response* to other human beings and to other beings in general. We are in-formed, that is, always within processes of being formed by our way of *responding*. "*Information*" in this sense, as "affective" and becoming is inseparable from "*communication*" - in the sense of responding within the condition of being in-common. This is a different sense of "information" than we have thus far been discussing; it is an older, and now somewhat minority sense of the word that involves co-determination, co-responsibility, affects, and interpretation. This all may sound very abstract, but to me, the condition of not seeing ourselves as fundamentally in-common, as affective, and becoming is what is so bizarre and abstract and, in fact today, tragic. The "self" is a singular appearance out of constantly changing multitudes; its knowledge is a set of tools, a power (in the sense of *potentia*), for doing things. Neither the self nor its knowledge are "informational" or "information" in the modern sense of being constant and transferable in simple exchange or "transmission" relationships. Expression and understanding are not like that.

With these last remarks I hope to point out that these contemporary issues have very complex, historical and cultural metaphysical assumptions and prejudices behind them which need to be conceptually and rhetorically worked through. We really are engaged in working through the "grammar" (in both the linguistic and discursive sense of the word and a broader sense meaning 'ways of doing things') of "cultural metaphysics" when we do critical theory. "Philosophy" is both the problem and part of the solution here, depending on how we view the meaning of this term. The issues must be approached tactically, though, and not canonically through any one discipline or, as some say, "method." The issues are real and current in our everyday lives, not simply historical artifacts, which is to say that they are political and personal problems that have deep and broad historical and cultural roots.

In many ways, my work is pointed toward restoring to the word "information" senses of affect and becoming; to giving back to the word "information" community and the lived experiences of time.

In its most ontological form, community is “always-already.” That is to say that community is the condition of the past, present, and future founded upon three in-common qualities for beings: finitude, extension, and language.

AP: Now that we've talked about the role of critical theory in the field, I'd like to focus on the role of critical theory in LIS education. LIS, as a discipline, has been criticized for not having a “unifying theory” of any sort. Given this alleged theoretical vacuum, where do you see critical theory fitting into current LIS academic departments? What do you see as the role of critical theory in the LIS curriculum of the future?

RD: “Theory” can mean many things. “Critical theory,” in the sense that I use this term, means not only a type of theory that is “critical” in the sense of working out the internal, but unspoken, contradictions of normative foundational assumptions and grammars (a Derridean or “deconstructive” sense, or even one familiar to Frankfurt school theorists), nor is the meaning of this term for me limited to more general methods of criticism so that alternative lines of thought and life will be possible (a Deleuzian or even in some ways a Negrian or Foucaultian sense of “critical theory”). But, what I mean by “critical theory” is not only both the above senses, but more generally, the necessity of discursive (i.e., “theoretical”) interventions which are “critical” in the sense that at certain historical moments normal ways of doing things no longer work or they work but in ways that are obviously inadequate or are false or non-inclusive or non-explanatory, so that discursive interventions which affect both linguistic and non-linguistic “practices” (i.e., traditionally, “theory” and “practice”) become “critical” to the very possibility of any types of practices occurring with any positive meaning or value. “Critical theory,” is, thus, an issue of social and historical necessity - it is a space-specific and time-valued practice. Its moments of “negativity” are actually positive because what they intervene in is negative repetition, that is, nihilism, toward the hope of freeing up generative thought and activity again. “Critical Studies” is the study of the moments of this necessity and studying the acquisition, development, and deployment of tools for such interventions. It is a specific and legitimate field of study that must accompany any traditionally “theoretical” or “empirical” practices. So “critical theory” in this last sense may be seen as a moment of conceptual, or more particularly, rhetorical or discursive, intervention that is necessary at historically or socially “critical” moments within a textual or verbal discursive practice or in other modes of doing things. “Practice,” in this sense, isn't the opposite of “theory”; theory is practiced, and practices are theorized, in the sense that they are made verbally or otherwise explicit. This is a sense of the word “critical” that is both pragmatic and also can be quite radical as I attempted to suggest above.

Let me illustrate what I have been saying about the relation between “practice,” “theory,” and “critical theory” by giving an example in (L)IS. I am aware that this approach must be further worked out and it may apply to only one general type of practice of “theory” and “critical theory,” but let me offer it as one provisional approach that still needs to be further worked on.

Let me begin by saying that I think that the way that we often view “theory” and “practice” in the (L)IS field is sometimes naïve. Theory is not made up of transcendental or in this sense, “foundational,” statements (“first principles”) within which “practices” then fall for all eternity. Theory consists in discursive and conceptual interventions when customary physical or discursive habits or practices no longer seem to work. Such interventions may consist of analogical borrowings and reasoning from other fields and from other cases. At a time of transition from libraries to digital libraries, from physical systems to digital systems, for example, customary practices and values must be *reconceptualized* (theory) and these borrowings must then be considered in regard to their appropriateness, outcomes, and logical and discursive consistency and coherence, diachronically and synchronically (critical theory). In other words, we must both reconceptualize and put that reconceptualization into a theoretical practice, which means in reality, actual practices in both discursive and non-discursive forms. “Critical theory” means not simply reimagining the future, but doing so in such a way that one is throwing the dice toward a different future. It is not a solipsistic sense of “theorizing” but it is an engaged sense of such. Such work is practical (it addresses problems when we are not sure how to proceed or even how to imagine how to proceed) and it is empirical (in that it uses historical, social, and cultural materials in the form of discursive orders, such as texts, oral communication, concepts, social problems, and cultural categories). Such work is qualitative in that it considers problems of definition and value, rather than assuming such for the sake of quantitative methods and results.

Thus, “theory” is not the transcendental opposite of “practice” and “practice” is not the implementation of “theory.” There is no reason to assume a transcendental realm or solipsistic realm as the dwelling place for “theory” or “critical theory.” Theory is a mode of practice according to descriptive techniques, and the purpose of those descriptive techniques is to help us solve problems that occur when our usual habits (“practice”) of physically and linguistically acting or being able to act no longer work the ways that we think are most promising. “Critical theory,” then, in this somewhat formalized or operationalized sense, may be understood as the activity of evaluating the analogical borrowings and judgments that we make in theory in regard to reality and rational consistency. Both “theory” and “critical theory” are eminently

practical and both are necessary in times of cultural and technological stasis as well as change. They are inseparable from one another in any truly “critical” enterprise.

As you have indicated, there has been in the past considerable discussion in the (L)IS literature as to the need to address a “theoretical” vacuum in the field and the need in (L)IS for a unified theory. However, in my view this is naïve, not only for the reasons above, but also for strictly historical and sociological reasons. The desire for a unified theory and following from this, a unified field, assumes, first of all, that disciplines are founded upon such, which is no longer the case even if it was ever true. Research now relies upon interdisciplinary techniques, models, and vocabulary—practical-conceptual assemblages and various conjoining activities - rather than upon grander visions of foundational “core” theoretical concepts and literal objects of inquiry. As an analogy, one could say that if biology departments were as obsessed with their essential foundations and their proper objects of study as (L)IS departments have been, and in some cases still are, then they would still be doing morphology and anatomy—classifying and dissecting frogs and alike—rather than working in interdisciplinary teams doing genetics research. And while such interdisciplinary research does sometimes occur (mostly in IS, rather than LS) the discursive “longing” for foundations remains in some quarters and certainly demands that, at least, conceptual and historical analyses done in (L)IS be redirected from other important concerns back to these anxieties.

Historically, the problem with (L)IS has been not that it lacks foundations, but rather, that in many schools, particularly library schools at the Masters level, these schools have traditionally been rather insular and have comparatively lacked a vocabulary and a research agenda that can cross disciplines—in other words, they have lacked the ability to take part in wider university discourses and so when budget cuts came along they had few intellectual roots across the university system, and thus, few colleagues understanding or supportive of their work. Outside of a narrow focus—libraries, librarians, and their “users”—they have failed to demonstrate an essential place as part of larger academic and social discourses and research and have historically lacked an ability to discourse across interdisciplinary lines. The situation is somewhat changing, particularly at the doctoral level, I believe, although my direct experience is limited to (L)IS at Masters level schools. The problem of doctoral programs seems to be that of resisting being turned into minor Computer Science or Management programs. “User studies,” it seems to me, has managed to define LS and IS in a particular and unique manner in regard to information technologies and “information behavior,” but I wonder sometimes how secure this type of research is—how

many types of “information behaviors” can one suppose to “discover” and just how many human activities can one operationalize into research projects based on “information behavior?” I don’t know. Perhaps it is infinite. But, information retrieval and with it “information behavior” seem to me to be rather narrow foci, and the classic cognitive-turn theoretical concepts and models in the field are, in my view, not very solid (for example, Belkin’s conveniently named ASK model, the notion of cognitive “images,” Brookes’ so-called “fundamental equation,” and so forth), even if they may “work” in the published narratives that accompany operationally defined empirical research.

With this last point, I might add, there is the familiar problem in the social sciences of circularity, that is, of seeing the world in terms of categories (“user,” “information behavior,” “information needs”) and then constructing “empirical” (in the social science sense) investigations and “experiments” that validate the categories but say little about the world as it really is. The fundamental, critical need here is to rethink the categories conceptually—not simply to “test” a hypothesis and in so doing support the model that lies behind it via operationalizing reality. What is often viewed as “empirical” research in the social sciences assumes values and meanings for concepts and terms used to study the world, whereas the real empirical issue may sometimes be the relationships between values and meanings and the world.

If it is thought that the best thing is to have a plurality of types of research done in (L)IS, then I would argue for an even more “interdisciplinary” table than now, which would include more conceptual work, which in the U.S. is traditionally seen under the disciplinary category of the “humanities.” Further, I would add, this work needs to be allowed to develop in a way other than as “foundations” research in (L)IS or as reactions to traditional (L)IS anxieties about “proper” foci and “proper” (i.e., recently privileged) “methods” of “empirical” research in the field. We need to let our faculty be free to pursue what they think is proper. Maybe that is done at some institutions, but I think the anxieties about finding (L)IS “foundations” and about using “proper” “methods” still dictate and restrict - and in some cases, condemn—(L)IS researchers and departments (beginning, of course, in graduate education).

Likewise, the “practitioner” focus of (L)IS programs at the Masters level is a red herring, in so far that it can lead to an anti-intellectualism and the reduction of graduate education to skills training. “Practitioners” need to rethink their fields, too, and need to be, as I have said, “information professionals” in a broader social and political sense, and this involves conceptual and critical thinking, which is not strongly supported in Masters level and even doctoral level (L)IS education. The

concern that Library Science is too much “training” and not enough “education” isn’t a new concern nor mine alone; the same concern occupied the Board of Trustees at then Columbia College when contemplating the establishment of Dewey’s School of Library Economy, so the concern has been with us for some time.

Professionals should be “intellectuals” on given topics, and this means not simply that of being able to do some tasks well or, on the other hand, to be available to validate some observation made by this or that reporter in the popular press and media. To be an “intellectual”(and I must confess that I feel somewhat unhappy with the elitist connotations of this word in English, but I don’t see another one at the moment that is better) means to take critical positions on accepted themes and frames of reference and the rhetorical devices and organizational supports that reinforce and repeat these frames and their representations. To do this, one must be *educated*, not simply trained, since “training” commonly has a dominantly prescriptive sense, and as I have explained above, the very act of critique is literally positioned right up *against* the prescriptive, even as it contains elements of rigor tactically applied.

Critical theory, in its aspect as social *critique*, is to make the illusional real again: to make standardized reproduction accountable in terms of the materials and agents of production; to tear back the mystery of “things as they are and always will be” and to show just how this happened and happens, how the specificities of time and space—how our lives themselves, including our lived senses of time—are denied us by those in power and by our habits of thought, and to give us some room to imagine and to create different futures than the ones we are told are inevitable.

So, for all these reasons, I think that “critical information theory” and/or “critical information studies” are a needed part of the (L)IS field and I don’t see why we in (L)IS so often give away the concerns that we have been talking about here to other fields in the humanities, communication studies, media studies, cultural studies, etc. and claim that they are not our “proper” focus of study.

AP: On a concluding note, I would like to get your comments about ethics and social consciousness in the LIS field. How do you see professional ethics and social consciousness and critique evolving in the future? Are information professionals on course for increased involvement in the social reproduction of scientific, rationalist, commodified notions of information, or are ruptures and critical interventions possible that question dominant constructions of information and their relationships to dominant ideologies and power structures?

RD: This last is a difficult question. On the one hand, from a pessimistic perspective and at a general level, one would be hard pressed to say other than that, largely, information professionals and (L)IS educators are increasingly drawn up into whatever formal and institutional structures of power there are, including the current marketing and markets of whatever “information” and “knowledge” may be seen as being at a given time. They are no different than the rest of the population in this. Increasingly, and overwhelmingly, universities as a whole are relegating “critical” thought to “critical thinking” classes and to selected, down-sized, marginalized, and de-fanged areas of the humanities. As we know, “critical theory,” broadly understood, too has become a product of the market place, with beginners guides and cheat-sheets on well treaded and well traded names such as Foucault and Derrida and Heidegger, leaving behind, curiously, but indicatively, the very emphasis these writers placed upon *reading* as an engaging social task exemplifying thought and the fundamentality of the experience of *time* and *interpretation* in human experience. The works of these writers are very much “known” and “applied,” but ironically, it seems that their actual works are very little read these days, much less with careful attention. (My attention to these writers here is not to exemplify them in terms of the categories of “critical” or “critical theory,” but rather to point to the importance of certain “critical” themes in their works that have been “informationalized” within the production apparatus of the technocratic university.) “Professional” education (a little ironically, given the relatively independent agency that professionals have enjoyed since the beginnings of industrial capitalism), has not traditionally seen “critical” thought, and in (L)IS or IS, interpretative or analogical thinking involving textual or more broadly, discursive, analysis, as central to their curriculum or research.

Certainly, however, in (L)IS, the situation is better than when I first started to get involved in it a decade ago, when the very limited vocabulary available for circulation in the field was itself a huge problem (this remains a problem today, but to a lesser, or at least, less obvious extent than at that time). The issue of the relation of (L)IS, as a largely Masters level program of study, tied to a prescriptively oriented professional accreditation body that is relatively outside of general academic discourse is also a problem, as is the form of the traditional and still current discourse on “practitioners,” “practice,” and “theory” and the way that these all shape and restrict the curriculum of (L)IS schools and their ability to both teach and to do research. Last, in (L)IS overall and in Information Science at the doctoral level in particular, there is the increasingly prevalent issue of the pressures of external “outcome-based” funding to direct not only “education” in the direction of “training,” but to dictate faculty hiring and advancement.

All these things can work against critical engagements in (L)IS, both as an academic practice and as a “practitioner” practice, as well as against critical engagements in other disciplines elsewhere throughout the university. Right now, as well, there are ideological pressures and in some states in the U.S. legislative bills that entail curbing critical thought in the university in the name of “balance,” where what this really means is allowing the dominant media and the ruling ideologies and fundamentalisms to finally, fully appropriate the public universities, which are seen by the Right and even sometimes by centrists and liberals as the last bastion of “Leftists” in the U.S. This not only threatens critical thought and Enlightenment values, but as is becoming recognized, even threatens basic scientific research in the physical and biological sciences, as well.

On the optimistic side, the nice part of life is that one never really knows what will happen. I have great faith in the goodness of people and in their need to experience joy by interacting with one another and being creative outside of enforced routes. The conditions and possibilities for critical research, education, and just, generally, expression in (L)IS are somewhat better in the field than they were just ten years ago.

In the university structure as a whole there remains, to some degree, corners of resistance to the cultural, economic, and political forces that oppose and have been appropriating the university as an historically *critical* institution (at least since the University of Berlin). The same is true of the struggle for the public sphere, which librarians, to their credit, have been involved in.

In terms of social and “professional” activities, there are acts of courage - and I can’t describe such acts as anything less given the current institutional and political parameters that we live in. To name only a few particular examples in and around LIS: the listserv “librarians for peace” run by Beth Bogdanski, the institutional and individual oppositions of librarians to the United States’ “Patriot Act,” those academics who still believe in the critical mission of the university, and to my sense, the very existence of this journal itself, are all acts and examples of courage in our field.

The triple evils plaguing the U.S. in particular, and the world in general, that Martin Luther King saw - poverty (as a result of economic accumulation and exploitation), racism (as a result of always needing an “other” to blame and to trample on in order to assert one’s own self or group identity) and war (as always preparing for and executing violence) remain quite dominant. And authoritarianism seems to have made quite a comeback, with the authoritarian personality living a relatively unchallenged life of ease today in the U.S.

“Information” and the discourse on information are part of our struggles today. As a modernist trope, “information” has a relatively privileged position in regard to the organization of our social lives and institutions and, thus, to our constructions of personal identity. It behooves us to conceptually study it as a social, cultural and as an historical phenomenon because it isn’t an empirical object, but rather, it is a conceptually developed notion of the value and use of documents, technologies, and expressions which shapes our relations to others and to ourselves, in the past, the present, and into the future.

AP: Ron, thank you for taking time and being part of this engaging and “informative” discussion. I am glad to have shared our discussion with the InterActions community, and look forward to continuing this conversation in the future.

RD: Thank you, Ajit, for the great pleasure of this interview. I wish the best for you, your colleagues, and for the very interesting project of *InterActions*.