

# Interview with Eamon Tewell<sup>1</sup>

by Marco Schneider, Ana Lúcia Alexandre Borges and Arthur Coelho Bezerra

---

1. Eamon, six years ago you published a highly cited bibliographic review article titled *A Decade of Critical Information Literacy* (2015), in which you were able to explore some points in common between researchers on the topic, such as the criticisms of the institutional conventions and norms prescribed by ACRL for the term information literacy (IL) and the epistemological turn towards Brazilian educator and radical thinker Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. You also mention the possibility for reconceptualizing contradictory definitions of IL using Radical Democratic Theory and point out the commitment of critical information literacy (CIL) with social justice. How would you describe your understanding of Radical Democratic Theory and social justice? Are they somehow euphemistic ways to talk about socialism amidst conservative intellectual environments?

**Eamon:** At its core, social justice means continuing to strive towards a society that is equitable for everyone regardless of social status, and with particular attention to those who are most marginalized or in the greatest need. It means people should have the essentials necessary to live, like housing, food, and healthcare, as well as education and avenues for participation in society. Social justice also recognizes that scarcity and the inequalities predicated upon it are manufactured through existing sociopolitical arrangements. Radical democracy is one possibility for arriving at a more socially just world, and as expressed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, radical democratic theory recognizes that there is value in building democracy around dissent, so that the oppressive power relations that liberal democracy upholds can be challenged.

Radical democracy is one approach among many for moving towards social justice, and while it's one that I particularly like, instead focusing solely on a specific

---

<sup>1</sup> Eamon Tewell is Head of Research Support and Outreach at Columbia University Libraries. He has published and presented on the topics of critical information literacy, library instruction, critical reference practice, and questioning narratives of grit and resilience in libraries, and is a recipient of the Jesse H. Shera Award for Distinguished Published Research. Eamon received his Masters in Library & Information Science from Drexel University and his Master of Arts in Media Studies from Long Island University.

theory or political affiliation, I find it useful to emphasize the elements that make social justice possible: participatory community involvement, collective action, and ultimately mass movements that are led by the people. There's no doubt that this would entail a society that is more socialist than what exists in North America, and it requires recognizing that capitalism and social justice are entirely at odds and incompatible. So, to answer the second part of your question: yes, there can be an element of that, and that is ok. One should use whatever language they need to to talk about social issues, and if that involves some degree of euphemism depending on a political climate, that can be acceptable to an extent. Most importantly, especially in an educational setting, is bringing inequalities into plain sight, questioning capitalism's contradictions, and proceeding from there.

\* \* \*

2. In the paper *The Practice and Promise of Critical Information Literacy* (2018), in which you illustrate the ways that librarians incorporate this vital approach to teaching the complexities of information, you mention that the benefits of practicing CIL in teaching include increased engagement, meaningfulness and the creation of sense of community among learners. How could these aspects contribute to the realization of personal political agency and enhance critical abilities of students in relation to politics, fostering active citizenship?

**Eamon:** For effective learning in any setting, things like engagement, meaningfulness, and having a sense of shared commitment are important qualities. What critical information literacy offers as a framework is ideas and inspiration for recognizing libraries, and information systems more broadly, as sites where knowledge and meaning are constructed and contested. This shift towards understanding libraries as reflecting and perpetuating dominant ideologies, and never being neutral in the information they provide or ways that they operate, is significant because it asks us to recognize how oppression functions in other contexts and domains in ways that aren't often acknowledged. Libraries pose a set of issues to contend with, from the white heteronormative male perspective that makes up the bulk of North American academic libraries' collections to racial bias in the ways that learners are supported through outreach and reference services. By extension, other institutions and outlets where information's circulation is central, particularly those who profit from it, demand a great deal of scrutiny as well.

The key to critical information literacy and any socially-engaged pedagogy is to make it meaningful and applicable for learners. This is accomplished through de-

stabilizing hierarchies and creating opportunities for dialogue, participation, and reflection. Ideally, the outcome is showing students that their voices matter, and that they have the power to understand and take action on the civic issues that impact them and are important to them. It's not necessarily a direct translation from the classroom to other settings, but when students are actively engaged in their own education and see how what they are learning relates to everyday life, it has the potential for them to acknowledge their agency as active contributors to social and political processes instead of bystanders.

\* \* \*

3. In that same 2018 paper, you talk about the difficulty to both "help students grasp the basics" and "branch out into a more critical approach to research", worrying that "sometimes the critical approach may actually do a disservice to our first-gen students, if emphasizing the critical side displaces opportunities to practice the basics". Descartes's invitation for rational questioning on intellectual authorities, through systematic doubt, somehow founded the modern science spirit that stands until today, but now we face a growing nihilism against scientific authorities, that comes along with a blind faith in pseudo-cognitive authorities.

When we think of the Covid-19 crisis and the appalling effects of the circulation of false information on people's health and lives, in what ways do you believe the practice of CIL could be used, for instance, to increase critical consciousness of citizens worldwide and stimulate individuals to develop capabilities for critical evaluation and ethical use of information?

Critical information literacy and critical pedagogy have a role to play in the critical evaluation of information, but at the same time, it's important for educators to be realistic about what can be accomplished through the critical evaluation of information. With the rise of far-right politicians in certain countries across the globe and the Covid-19 crisis, we have seen how misinformation tactics benefit from concentrated corporate power found in large tech companies such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter, and capitalize on an unfortunate distrust of experts in fields that are necessary to sound decision-making about health and public policy. For many people, facts are not enough to change one's mind, and we know very clearly that people will willfully misinterpret information while seeking out that which confirms their worldviews and biases. The problem with misinformation and ignoring experts is not one of information literacy, then, it is one of power. That means it must be addressed on multiple fronts, from the tech companies providing platforms regardless of inciting hate to the politicians exacerbating the health risks of a deadly pandemic by downplaying its severity.

CIL plays a role within a certain educational domain, but it certainly isn't the answer to this massive issue. Critical source evaluation can only get us so far, since some people refuse to have their mind changed, and a widespread distrust of experts or officials that one disagrees with won't be surmounted through reasoning. The issue of trust must be addressed, and we will need to find ways of building trust in one another. This emphasis on relationality and understanding is a strong suit of critical pedagogy. It's important to learn strategies for questioning systems and verifying information while retaining an openness to different perspectives and not letting one's perspective become steeped in a pervasive cynicism, and at the small-scale level, that is where critical information literacy comes in.

\* \* \*

4. Since the first publication about CIL in Brazil, in 2015, we have defended the intention of transcending established teaching spaces, such as the school and the library, to problematize the contact with information that is made by individuals in general in the digital environment, especially taking into account the surveillance of personal digital data of citizens by governments and companies for political and economic purposes. You say that "critical information literacy considers in what ways librarians may encourage students to engage with and act upon the power structures underpinning information's production and dissemination". In what ways do you think CIL's practice could expand beyond the classroom and library walls, fostering critical consciousness to take place and enabling more critically and politically engaged citizens, capable of questioning oppressive power structures and acting upon these systems?

**Eamon:** Critical information literacy is knowingly practiced among a relatively small number of people, who consist primarily of librarians and library workers, and to a lesser degree, some faculty and instructors who are aware of the concept and its connection with media studies. Given that the areas it seeks to address are so expansive and highly applicable to issues such as the intersections of digital surveillance, platform capitalism, and political polarization, there is a lot of room for CIL to grow into other areas, but I would personally like to see more adoption of it within libraries and other instructional settings to begin with. Many people working in libraries still have not reckoned with the fact that libraries are implicated in systems of oppression – in many ways perpetuating ideologies of patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism – much less have taken steps to address the manifestation of these issues within their libraries or through teaching and learning activities with students. So, there's a lot to be done even within libraries in regards to realizing some of the more everyday aims of CIL, and while

there's indeed potential for expansion of how it is enacted in other settings that will likely occur naturally, there is considerable work to do to act upon the many problems present in libraries alone. Before attempting to tackle other large issues in any meaningful way, it's important that libraries put their own figurative "houses" in order.

\* \* \*

5. In his 2012 article on CIL, James Elmborg affirms that teaching writing can be "a sometimes coercive activity that involves almost literally forcing students into linguistic constructions (and by extension, ways of thinking) that would make them sound 'normal', which is to say 'white' and 'middle-class'", which reveals his concern with the consciousness of the role of economic and racial conditions (and, I believe we would agree to add, gender and sexual orientation) in the distribution of power, hoping that such awareness turns into a real engagement with the structures that promote such inequalities. Could collaborations with other fields of study be a way to expand CIL practices and work toward causes of antiracism, anti-sexism, antihomophobia and the elimination of other forms of oppression?

**Eamon:** Collaboration with other fields is essential for critical information literacy to progress and realize its aims. CIL has always been informed by related areas of study, especially writing studies and feminist pedagogy, and this undoubtedly strengthens it as a theory and practice that is responsive to real world conditions. There are many allied fields within and outside of the university, and bringing critical information literacy perspectives to these areas and identifying shared concerns and goals is helpful in any efforts that are collaborative, as all social justice work must be. It is also important to recognize these connections, whether with social work, journalism, ethnic studies, health sciences, technology, or the humanities, as being rooted in a specific context. Simply applying general principles of CIL to various areas ignores what makes it most relevant and applicable, which is an analysis of information that is informed by critical theory and guided by learners' interests, experiences, and lives.

To actively work towards causes such as antiracism and anti-sexism, CIL and those who practice it can learn a great deal from activist and social justice movements. It is an important first step to surface CIL-related issues through teaching, but quite another thing to grapple with chipping away at deeply-entrenched power structures. Learning the strategies of activists and what it takes to build movements can only benefit teachers in this sense. For example, I have learned much from the labor movement, and understanding firsthand that those in pow-

er will do anything other than choose to give up that power. That means in order to effectively challenge that which is exploitative and unjust, it is essential to collectively organize and build shared power. Without an understanding of power, including how it operates and how it can be built, practicing CIL will be limited in what it can realistically accomplish.

\* \* \*

6. Brazilian researches on critical information literacy (competência crítica em informação) emphasize the critique of information literacy's focus on the job-and-skills-driven neoliberal agenda. Just like the discussions and writings on CIL that have been taking place in North America, Brazilian studies have been particularly influenced by key works of critical pedagogy by Paulo Freire. However, it is important to point out that Brazilian researchers recognize the great influence that the Marxist historical materialism had on Freire's critical pedagogy, as well as on the critical theory developed by the German philosophers of the so-called Frankfurt School. What do you think would be the reasons for the Marxist critical fortune to remain invisible in CIL studies, which seem to share the same philosophical and ethical-political principles?

**Eamon:** That is an interesting question, and I appreciate how Brazilian researchers have made that important influence explicit. It is surely due to several factors, but the general inclination among librarians in North America to avoid discussing politics explicitly, in their work and scholarship, as well as an overall emphasis on immediate applicability and practicality of one's research, undoubtedly contribute to this. Major journals in North American Library & Information Science rarely respond favorably to studies that are not empirical or quantitative, so critical theory in general does not often appear in scholarly conversations there. Considering the Frankfurt School in particular, many researchers contributing to the literature are librarians who may or may not have a formal educational background in this area, so they may feel unequipped to comment on or effectively incorporate these theorists into their work. Happily, there are more and more exceptions to this as time goes on. In Canada in particular, an increasing number of researchers are examining the political economy of libraries and information, and are drawing upon Marxism in particular to do so. Being explicit about these connections and where influences are drawn from is important, and as the field progresses I expect there will be more explicit acknowledgement of Marxist thought as well as other important thinkers, particularly in critical race theory, who have much to offer in expanding the current bounds of CIL.

\* \* \*

7. Looking back and examining 15 years of research in critical information literacy (CIL), we could say that encouraging students to engage with and act upon the power structures underpinning information's production and dissemination seems to be more important today than ever. It is crucial, for instance, for younger generations to understand the economic power structures behind huge tech corporations such as Google and Facebook, and how algorithms in these giant platforms are designed to filter information and perpetuate the status quo. In this scenario, are you still as optimistic as you were at the end of the first decade of critical information literacy, when you affirmed that "the lessons of critical pedagogy offers us the possibility of hope and change"?

**Eamon:** Yes! I am still enthusiastic about critical pedagogy as a means of co-constructing meaning in education, and that impact filtering outside of the classroom as a way of creating change. Given the challenges faced, critical pedagogy in itself is not sufficient for creating large-scale change, but it remains a promising and worthwhile undertaking for teachers and learners alike. Change has to start somewhere – why not in the classroom, which is one of the few places where we are still encouraged to explore new ideas, to question dominant modes of information production, and imagine new ways of living that are more free and just for all people?

## References

BEZERRA, A. C. Vigilância e filtragem de conteúdo nas redes digitais: desafios para a competência crítica em informação. In: Anais do XVI ENANCIB - Encontro Nacional de Pesquisa em Ciência da Informação. João Pessoa: ANCIB, 2015.

ELMBORG, J. Critical information literacy: Definitions and challenges. In: WILKINSON, C. W.; BRUCH, C. (orgs). **Transforming information literacy programs**: Intersecting frontiers of self, library culture, and campus community. Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2012.

FREIRE, P. **Pedagogy of the oppressed** (translated by Myra Bergman Ramos; introduction by Donald Macedo. 30th anniversary ed). New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2005

TEWELL, E. A decade of critical information literacy: A review of the literature. **Communications in Information Literacy**, 2015, 9 (1), pp. 24–43.

TEWELL, E. The Practice and Promise of Critical Information Literacy: Academic Librarians' Involvement in Critical Library Instruction. **College & Research Libraries** 79, no. 1 (2018): 10-34.