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LOCATING INFORMATION LITERACY WITHIN

INSTITUTIONAL OPPRESSION

Editor's note: On July 16th, 2014 we published [Open Source Outline: Locating the Library within Institutional Oppression](#), where we discussed nina de jesus's [Outline for a Paper I Probably Won't Write](#) and called for authors to use her open source outline as the basis for an article of their own. We are pleased that nina herself and Joshua Beatty have both taken up the challenge. Below is [Joshua Beatty's article](#) based on that outline. In a first for *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, we are also simultaneously publishing [nina de jesus's article](#) based on the same outline.



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In Brief: The ACRL's draft *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* represents a chance to undo the neoliberal assumptions of earlier information literacy standards. Despite some positive changes, the language of the *Framework* still reinforces existing structures of power. The *Framework* relies on a rhetoric of crisis and on the metaphors “information marketplace” and “information ecosystem.” These metaphors naturalize information resources as a series of walled gardens that might instead have been part of a larger commons.

by [Joshua Beatty](#)

Introduction

In a January 2014 talk entitled [“The Neoliberal Library: Resistance Is Not Futile,”](#) Chris Bourg argued that “neoliberalism is toxic for higher education, but research libraries can & should be sites of resistance.” Bourg gives as examples four areas of the research library affected by neoliberalism: instruction and reference, collection development, staffing models, and assessment. It seems to me that those areas are not exclusive to libraries at our largest research institutions. Small college libraries perform all these functions, though the balance may differ. For example, I work at a self-defined “teaching library” at a four-year state college, a library which prioritizes instruction in information literacy over support for faculty research. If my library is to be a site of resistance to neoliberalism, that resistance must start in the area the library considers central

to its mission.

Yet current formulations of information literacy make it difficult for any such library to resist neoliberalism. In this article I will follow Maura Seale's analysis of the neoliberal underpinnings of existing information literacy standards to show that they also apply to the draft document soon to supercede them. I will concentrate on the rhetoric of the document, especially the way in which, to use Bourg's terms, "market language and metaphors" have colonized the *Framework*. Finally, I will show how uncritically using that language has led us to naturalize the current model of production, organization, and distribution of scholarly information that we take for granted in our libraries today.

Neoliberalism

In her lecture, Bourg follows Daniel Saunders in defining neoliberalism as "a varied collection of ideas, practices, policies and discursive representations ... united by three broad beliefs: the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy, and the individual as a rational economic actor." She continues:

Neoliberal thinking emphasizes individual competition, and places primary value on "employability" and therefore on an individual's accumulation of human capital and marketable skills.

A key feature of neoliberalism is the extension of market logic into previously non-economic realms – in particular into

key social, political and cultural institutions.

We can see this when political candidates promote their experience running a successful business as a reason to vote for them, and in the way market language and metaphors have seeped into so many social and cultural realms.

For example, Neoliberalism is what leads us to talk about things like “the knowledge economy”, where we start to think of knowledge not as a process but as a kind of capital that an individual can acquire so that she then can sell that value to the market.

In short, neoliberalism pressures us to assume that markets and competition are an efficient way to distribute resources, to believe it necessary for individuals to self-fashion themselves as useful to the system, and to reduce all judgments of value to purely economic terms. These and similar examples play out every day in library instruction, promoted by the information-literacy standards that underlie our teaching.

Information literacy: the ACRL's *Standards and Framework*

Information literacy is probably taught in as many ways as there are libraries that teach it. Though the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) promotes its own [*Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*](#), published in 2000, not all academic libraries

follow those guidelines. But some follow them very closely. New York's state university system, for example, has an "information management" competency in its system-wide general education requirements. The learning outcomes for the State University of New York's (SUNY) general education program are very similar to the ACRL's *Standards*, making it easier for individual colleges to adopt the details of the *Standards* when drafting their school's specific information literacy requirements.¹

Yet from the perspective of resistance to neoliberalism, any such institutional literacy program must be flawed from its beginning. [Maura Seale has shown that the *Standards* is an intimately neoliberal document.](#) It emphasizes measurable learning outcomes, which lead to a commodification of education. It sets as its goal the creation of the "information-literate student," a concept similar to the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* in that it erases all sociocultural context. The *Standards* emphasize "authoritative" sources too easily equated with the productions of for-profit publishers. And the *Standards* place an inordinate emphasis on the end result of gaining these skills as being merely job training.²

Seale argues that the *Standards* is merely the latest in a long line of information literacy documents that embrace neoliberal assumptions. She finds that the library profession has been unwilling to engage with critiques of neoliberalism from the fields of education and critical theory. Information literacy discourse is a "closed system." Even when information literacy discourse does open to a new concept, it removes that concept from any outside context and folds it back into the closed system. An example in

recent years has been information literacy's embrace of transliteracy.³

The *Standards* are likely irredeemable. But we are at a moment in which we might reclaim ACRL's information literacy guidelines from neoliberalism. This year the ACRL has proposed a new set of guidelines to replace the *Standards*: the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.⁴

This *Framework* as presently constituted is not just a revision of the *Standards*, but represents a new approach to teaching information literacy. Information literacy is defined around six "frames." These frames are titled "Scholarship is a Conversation," "Research as Inquiry," "Authority is Constructed and Contextual," "Format as a Process," "Searching as Exploration," and (added in the June draft) "Information has Value." Each frame combines a "threshold concept" with "knowledge practices / abilities and dispositions." Threshold concepts are defined as "those ideas in any discipline that are passageways or portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing within that discipline." Knowledge practices then demonstrate how learners increase their understanding, while dispositions define the values held by a learner who has passed the threshold.

The six frames take up nine pages. But they are surrounded by another twenty-five pages of supporting material, including a cover letter outlining changes since the last draft, an introduction with suggestions on how to use the document, sample assignments, a glossary and bibliography, and three appendices. The appendices include an earlier introduction under

the title “Setting the Context” and an “Introduction for Faculty and Administrators.” The presence of this last suggests the *Framework* is a political document, its ideas (if not the document itself) intended to be presented to other interest on campus as well as serve as a guide for librarians. It is no coincidence that the vision presented by the *Framework* embeds information literacy within every aspect of the curriculum, as an “overarching set of abilities in which students are both consumers and creators of information in multiple formats.”

From the perspective of the librarian attuned to critical information literacy issues, there are many ways in which the *Framework* significantly improves on the *Standards*. In the *Framework* training the “information-literate student” is less important than creating habits of “lifelong learning,” and “learning outcomes” are paralleled by more flexible “abilities” and “dispositions.” Learning outcomes themselves are left to the individual libraries to decide upon.

These advances reflect and incorporate the critiques of critical information literacy practitioners.⁵ Such librarians have acknowledged many aspects of the *Framework* as improving on the *Standards* but also expressed concern that these advances were insufficient. The *Framework*, they argued, should also emphasize “social inclusion; cultural, historical, and socioeconomic contexts; access issues; critical awareness of the mechanisms of establishing authority, including academic authority; and civic and community engagement” as well as the growing critical information literacy movement itself. If incorporated, these recommendations will carve

out small spaces of resistance to neoliberalism within the larger document.⁶

Crisis rhetoric

But a close reading of the *Framework* suggests that this critique does not go far enough. Key rhetorical measures deployed within the *Framework* serve to reinforce neoliberal notions, and creating spaces for resistance within the document leaves those intact. These measures include the rhetoric of crisis, the metaphor of the “information ecosystem,” and the metaphor of the “information marketplace.”

Under neoliberalism elites feel justified in using — and even creating — uncertainty and crisis in order to amass power. David Harvey has described how politicians and financiers take advantage of financial upheaval in order to transfer wealth from the poor to the rich — and sometimes have even created such crises on purpose. At universities and their libraries, administrators use the excuse of financial crises to demand reform, a process so common that it is called simply “austerity.” Libraries lose resources, and that money is shifted upwards to fund administrators’ priorities (and salaries). So it is with suspicion that we should look upon invocations of crisis for any new or revamped program in our libraries.⁷

It is precisely this rhetoric of crisis and reform that characterizes the 2014 *Framework*. On the very first page of the document, the authors explain that the *Framework* is a response to a “rapidly changing higher education environment, along with the dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem in which all of us work

and live, [that] require new attention to foundational ideas about that ecosystem.” Gilles Deleuze has written of such rhetoric that “the administrations in charge never cease announcing supposedly necessary reforms: to reform schools, to reform industries, hospitals, the armed forces, prisons.”⁸ Warnings of rapid change, dynamism, and uncertainty are thus meant to effect compliance from the subject rather than provoke critical thinking.

This kind of language has been used to justify the ACRL’s information literacy programs since their inception. The 2000 *Standards* insist that information literacy is particularly important “in the contemporary environment of rapid technological change and proliferating information resources.” The 1998 *Progress Report on Information Literacy* justifies information literacy through the “amount and variety of information” available both digitally and in print. The volume of information is now “staggering ... [and] has mushroomed beyond everyone’s wildest imagination.” And the 1989 *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report* explains the need for information literacy thus: “Information is expanding at an unprecedented rate, and enormously rapid strides are being made in the technology for storing, organizing, and accessing the ever growing tidal wave of information.”

The ACRL, then, for twenty-five years has periodically panicked about technological change to justify more comprehensive information literacy programs. Randall Munroe of XKCD provides us with one reasonable response:

THE
SIMPLE ANSWERS
 TO THE QUESTIONS THAT GET ASKED
 ABOUT EVERY NEW TECHNOLOGY:

WILL <input type="checkbox"/> MAKE US ALL GENIUSES?	NO
WILL <input type="checkbox"/> MAKE US ALL MORONS?	NO
WILL <input type="checkbox"/> DESTROY WHOLE INDUSTRIES?	YES
WILL <input type="checkbox"/> MAKE US MORE EMPATHETIC?	NO
WILL <input type="checkbox"/> MAKE US LESS CARING?	NO
WILL TEENS USE <input type="checkbox"/> FOR SEX?	YES
WERE THEY GOING TO HAVE SEX ANYWAY?	YES
WILL <input type="checkbox"/> DESTROY MUSIC?	NO
WILL <input type="checkbox"/> DESTROY ART?	NO
BUT CAN'T WE GO BACK TO A TIME WHEN—	NO
WILL <input type="checkbox"/> BRING ABOUT WORLD PEACE?	NO
WILL <input type="checkbox"/> CAUSE WIDESPREAD ALIENATION BY CREATING A WORLD OF EMPTY EXPERIENCES?	WE WERE ALREADY ALIENATED

As with neoliberal politicians and businessmen, when librarians use this rhetoric it serves to inflate the proposal's importance and to mask specific agendas under a guise of rational common-sense thinking, rather than identifying any truly disruptive historical moment.⁹

Ecosystem rhetoric

The opening paragraph of the 2014 *Framework*, then, emphasizes change. But what is it that is changing? It is a “higher education environment” and an “information ecosystem in which we all

work and live”; we must revise our “foundational ideas about that ecosystem.” The concept “information ecosystem” is the fulcrum of the *Framework*; it is used fifteen times, while “information environment” occurs another six.

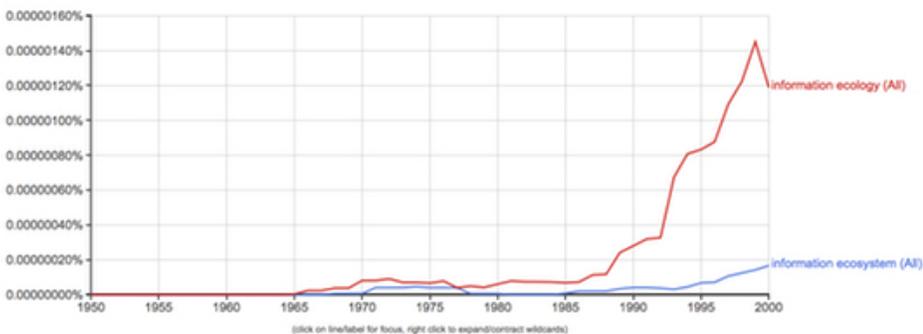
The phrase “information ecosystem” seems innocuous enough at first glance. It evokes images of connections, of interdependence, of a landscape known in full and thus made harmless, even appealing. But the concept has a history that belies those images — a history that reveals the phrase’s origins in the business literature of the 1990s tech bubble. By using this ecological metaphor in the *Framework* the authors thus reinforce the neoliberal ethos underlying that crisis.

A [Google ngram](#) shows that the phrase “information ecosystem” or “information ecology” saw a significant increase in use in the mid-1990s. To understand why the phrase appeared at that time — why librarians and others began to envision information with an environmental metaphor — we have to look at an article from 1993 that brought ecological imagery to the business world.

Google books Ngram Viewer

Graph these comma-separated phrases: case-insensitive

between and from the corpus with smoothing of



That year James F. Moore published [“Predator and Prey: A New Ecology of Competition”](#) in the *Harvard Business Review*. The article won the *HBR*’s award for best article of the year, and the author expanded it into a book, *The Death of Competition: Leadership and Strategy in the Age of Business Ecosystems*. Moore argued that the old model of understanding competition between businesses, as a simple head-to-head fight for market share within an industry, was outmoded. Instead, businesses should be thought of as parts of a “business ecosystem” that cuts across many industries. Within this “business ecosystem, “companies co-evolve capabilities around a new innovation: they work cooperatively and competitively to support new products, satisfy customer needs, and eventually incorporate the next round of innovations.” At times, the ecosystems themselves might find themselves in competition. Moore likened this to the border between a hardwood forest and a grassland.¹⁰

It is innovation that takes the place of evolutionary changes in Moore’s business ecosystems. Moore argues that we have to accept the collapse of business ecosystems as a fact of life. Instead of propping up old ecosystems, we should help those individuals affected make their way into newer, healthier ecosystems. The key to making this transition work is *laissez-faire* capitalism: “it’s only essential that competition among them is fierce and fair — and that the fittest survive.”

This last phrase is a tell. “Survival of the fittest” is a famous phrase coined by Herbert Spencer, and not Charles Darwin himself. Spencer, a philosopher, took up Darwinian ideas to argue for

the application of evolutionary ideas to society and politics. “Social Darwinism,” as it later came to be called, was the intellectual justification for decades of foreign colonization and internal racial oppression in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Nor was Darwin averse to the use of evolutionary ideas in this manner. Gregory Claeys has argued that both Darwin and Spencer were influenced by the Victorian intellectual culture of their time, which viewed society through a lens crafted by the Enlightenment thinker Thomas Malthus.

According to Claeys,

Malthus viewed society in terms of an organic metaphor in which similar laws governed both animal and human worlds. He strongly distinguished between people who benefitted society (as defined in terms of productivity) and those who did not, and he defined rights as derived solely from productivity, competition-as-natural-selection dictated the survival of the “fittest,” and the starvation of the less successful, unless other factors intervened. We do not, of course, have a theory of inherited characteristics in which this “fitness” is transmitted, but we do very nearly have the symbolic imagery, so suitable to an age that prized usefulness above all else, in which such a concept functioned not as science, but as social theory.¹¹

Our age, too, prizes “usefulness” above all else. Evolutionary metaphors are everywhere in our

culture. They're so pervasive that in an article about the dark underpinnings of evolutionary metaphors Claeys (to all appearances unwittingly) used one himself, referring to "intellectual historians concerned with how ideas themselves evolve." For Moore to use a fairly complex evolutionary metaphor to describe the world of business was no more than tycoons and corporate thinkers had been doing since the Gilded Age. But the ecological metaphor would itself become pervasive, creeping into the library world via the high-tech business press.

Moore's particular interest was in these high-tech companies. The running narrative throughout the article was the rise of the personal computer industry. Apple, IBM and Tandy are discussed in great detail, while Wal-Mart and the automobile industry were relegated to sidebars. And the technology industry embraced Moore's analysis. Quickly the tech press adopted Moore's terminology of ecologies that cut across industries. In 1997 another business thinker, Thomas Davenport, adapted Moore's ideas to corporate information systems. His book, *Information Ecology: Mastering the Information and Knowledge Environment*, [was excerpted in CIO magazine's May 1997 issue.](#)

Davenport's "information ecology":

emphasizes an organization's entire information environment. It addresses all of a firm's values and beliefs about information (culture); how people actually use the information and what they do with it (behavior and work processes); the pitfalls that can interfere with information sharing (politics); and

what information systems are already in place (yes, finally, technology).

Davenport's information ecology focused on the machines behind the information as much as the information itself. So too did the articles in a [1998 special issue of *Cultural Resource Management newsletter*](#), which marked the spot at which "information ecology" crossed over into the world of libraries and archives as the "information ecosystem." Diane Vogt-O'Connor's introductory article "The Information Ecosystem" took Davenport's definition of "information ecology" as an epigraph. She echoed neoliberal crisis rhetoric, stating that the "Cultural Resource Information Ecosystem is imperiled by increasing costs, decreased budgets, fewer staff, more users, burgeoning information, increasingly unstable information formats, changing professional information standards and practices, revised laws on fair use and copyright, and institutional restructuring and instability." Vogt-O'Connor put the journal's core audience on notice that they were now squarely placed in the new economy. "At the end of the 20th century," she wrote, "cultural resource managers have become knowledge workers." Richard Pierce-Moses, in an article on "The Information Ecology of Archives," echoed this sentiment, explaining that archivists must now work together with IT staff — but in a workplace more like the IT staffer's than the archive: "I believe that in the evolving high-tech information ecosystem, a savvy manager will look at the strengths of these two disciplines and forge a new alliance between them."

What we can conclude from this history is that "ecosystem" or "ecology" is a near-infinitely malleable metaphor. That malleability has made

it perfect for inserting into discussions of the unknown. From the mid-1990s on, it has been used as a way of signaling that, though there is a seemingly limitless amount of information, here is a way to think about that information as a whole. By describing information as within an ecosystem, we have defined its characteristics and its boundaries, and we understand the connections among its components. We don't necessarily control all the aspects of the ecosystem — but we can model them.

That acknowledgement that we don't control the network has another implication: that there is change in the “information ecosystem,” change driven over time by evolutionary processes. The environmental conditions change, and a given organism either has the right traits to thrive in the new environment, or it does not, and dies. Information, then, has a evolutionary value; higher-valued information survives at the cost of lower-valued.

Marketplace rhetoric

Perhaps not coincidentally, “Information has Value” is now a part of the 2014 *Framework*, added for the second draft published in May. “Information has Value” is one the six frames around which the new model of information literacy is built. In this section, the phrase “information ecosystem” does not appear. Instead, the metaphor used is “information marketplace.” The neoliberal connotations of the “information marketplace,” in a section titled “Information has Value,” are too obvious to require much discussion.

Neoliberal discourse tends to reduce everything to markets, and information is no exception.

Indeed, both “information marketplace” and “information ecosystem” work in very similar ways. Both “marketplace” and “ecosystem” are vague metaphors suggesting an ability to model the interaction of its contents, if not see it all at once. Both suggest that within that space interactions are continually taking place the result of which defines the value of the components interacting. In an “information marketplace,” information has value only to the point that the owner and the purchaser agree it does; moreover, that value is constantly compared to the value of other pieces of information. In an “information ecosystem” information has value only to the point that it is adapted to the current environmental conditions. In both, value is defined by comparison and equivalence; without those there is no way to define value.

The compatibility of these two models — the environment and the marketplace — is well-documented in historical literature. For elites, the evolutionary model has served to retroactively justify the hierarchy of society — the wealthiest and the most successful must have been the most fit, while those in ranks below were progressively less fit. Similarly, a marketplace rewards, impartially, the most valuable goods. These two models have popped up throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century whenever someone wanted to justify existing conditions as natural and proper. And even Herbert Spencer saw them as intimately connected, He believed that civilized societies eventually ceased to struggle through warfare and instead competed in the marketplace. The market was thus a natural outgrowth of evolutionary processes.¹²

Such an uncritical approach to how we describe information thus serves to justify its current state. Information today is largely a commodity. We have an internet that continually walls off portions: newspaper subscriptions, digital versions of books, and especially scholarly publications. The portions that are free we tell students to look upon with suspicion. Consider this: an encyclopedia exists on the internet, free to access, free for anyone to correct or to comment upon, and in many different languages. We view it with suspicion precisely because it is open and free.

Suspicion of free sources extends beyond Wikipedia. At an information literacy instruction workshop for teachers I attended this summer, the instructors wanted to discuss “authority” and how we teach it to students. They gave us two items about wind turbines: one the front page of a scholarly journal article, the other a printout of someone’s blog about the health effects they’d experienced from living near a wind farm. You didn’t need to read the text to just infer from the layout that it was the former which was “authoritative.” The blog’s design, in contrast, would be familiar to anyone who was on Blogger circa 2008: blog title and description in a too-large rectangular box at the top of the page, fonts suitable for viewing on low-resolution devices like a budget mid-2000s PC monitor.

[Read the blog.](#) Read a few posts from 2009 or so, when the author was posting regularly. Put yourself in their shoes. Some quick impressions: they live in the Ontario countryside, they have a wind turbine near them and they don’t understand it. They try to communicate, not just through the blog but in other ways, but the very medium of their communication marks them as

not to be taken seriously.

Consider just [this post](#): A neighbor has written to the local government and “Nik,” with the neighbor’s permission, reprints the piece. The neighbor writes at the end “Please don’t get us wrong we are all for green energy anything to help the planet it has been damaged enough, but when do we say wait a minute our health and way of life comes first.” They understand the justification for the wind turbines, but they don’t have a voice beyond their neighbor’s blog and a letter that may or may not have been read by local officials.

Nik and his neighbor have run afoul of ideas we take for granted about the relative value of information. Because the format and the context of their writing is irregular, the content is automatically discounted. Scholarly articles have passed a competitive process of peer review. The precisely-formatted pages of the journal becomes, in theory, the outward sign of the article’s innate value. But in an ecosystem or a marketplace of information it is precisely the format and context that is valued. Because something is on a free blog whose template hasn’t been changed since 2008 it is automatically of less worth than a paywalled academic article. “Marketplaces” and “ecosystems” of information thus serve to justify existing inequalities of access, both to content and to publication.¹³

Credentialism

We know that by privileging design and credentials over content we obscure these power relations, and that [reliance on appeals to](#)

“expertise” and “authority” is an important feature of neoliberal rhetoric. And yet, teaching students to identify the outward forms of reliable information is key to the whole concept of information literacy. Since students cannot yet judge the contents of a scholarly work without prior experience in that field, we show them how to first identify the credentials that indicate that a work *is* scholarly.

The 2014 *Framework*, like any other information literacy standards, must confront this paradox. The “Authority is Contextual and Constructed” frame takes on the problem in the most direct way. It acknowledges credentialism to be only a substitute for expertise: “The novice researcher may need to rely on superficial indicators of authority such as type of publication or author credentials where experts recognize schools of thought or discipline-specific paradigms.”

To equate expertise with “recognizing schools of thought or discipline-specific paradigms” is just to make it a slightly more sophisticated form of credentialism. To be sure, it’s a step towards expertise. Real academic expertise is born from immersion in a subject to the point that the meanings of these labels break down. What this threshold concept offers is not expertise, but the credentialism of first-year graduate students establishing their internal pecking order over a pitcher of beer.

Together the six frames describe the signs by which we know that a student has passed from “novice” to “expert.” But “expert” is never defined. Instead, each frame contains a brief description of how an expert understands information. Among these descriptions are:

- “The expert understands that there may not be a single uncontested answer to a query and, hence, is inclined to seek out the many perspectives in a scholarly conversation, not merely the one with which the expert already agrees.”
- “Experts see inquiry as a process that focuses on problems or questions in a discipline or between disciplines that are open or unresolved.”
- “Experts understand that authority is the degree of trust that is bestowed and as such, authority is both contextual and constructed.”
- “The expert understands that the quality and usefulness of a given piece of information is determined by the processes that went into making it.”

These descriptions represent improvement over how many incoming college students understand information. Yet the “expert” described in the 2014 *Framework* is really no more competent than the “information-literate student” that is the subject of the 2000 *Standards*. The difference is in the verbs: the “expert” understands, the “information-literate student” merely does. The expertise offered by the *Framework* is at best a first step.

Further, the *Framework* still neglects the power relations that govern access to the resources necessary to take part in the process of becoming expert. Seale’s argument about the *Standards* holds true for the *Framework*: without discussion of the causes of specific inequalities, the discussion slides towards a blame of the individual for not taking advantage of the opportunity to become information-literate.

The *Framework* and the Walled Garden

This article has so far highlighted the continuities between the *Framework* and earlier standards for information literacy. But there is one particular difference that I would like to explore. All the ACRL's information literacy documents since 1989 have invoked the threat of a looming crisis in order to spur action. In previous documents this crisis has been the a crisis of overabundance: the "proliferating information resources" of the *Standards* or the "mushroom[ing] beyond everyone's wildest imagination" of the 1998 *Progress Report*.

The *Framework*, in contrast, threatens us not with overwhelming information, but with merely a "rapidly changing higher education environment" and "dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem." This change in rhetoric likely results from the segregation of "reliable" resources from the rest of the Internet over the past fifteen years. Scholarly journals are hidden from public view within subscription databases. Major newspapers put their archives in those same databases and their current articles behind paywalls. Librarians make of these databases a virtue, telling students that by using them they will find only reliable sources. And when we do admit that reliable work can be found beyond our databases, we show them Google Scholar, itself designed to search only for scholarly sources.

The *Framework* thus not only assumes but is predicated upon the continuance of the current [system of walled gardens](#). Its conception of information literacy is about knowing not how but *where* to find gold untainted by dross. It

redefines expertise as little more than knowing how to find one's way around these walled gardens, and to identify when one has stepped outside. In short, the "information ecosystem" and "information marketplace" metaphors naturalize the enclosure of what might instead have been a commons.

Conclusion

I was inspired to write this article by nina de jesus's original outline for "Locating the Library within Institutional Oppression." At the conclusion of that outline, de jesus argues that libraries are potentially key tools of oppression because they target the mind. I believe that relative to its overall place within the library, information literacy is of outsize importance as a potential tool of oppression. Information literacy does not merely target the contents of the mind but consciously tries to change individuals' cognitive processes. This is especially true of the 2014 *Framework*, which hinges on "threshold concepts" — "those ideas in any discipline that are passageways or portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing within that discipline."

In this article I have tried to show why it is important for librarians to resist the neoliberal rhetoric of information literacy, and the particulars of that rhetoric deployed by the *Framework*. The *Framework* insists on its own necessity due to a supposed crisis. By describing information as embedded in an "ecosystem" or a "marketplace" it naturalizes the present condition of information scarcity. And it makes of that scarcity a virtue by using it as a credential of authority. The alternative is to resist, for ourselves

and for our students, by insisting on the possibility of a true commons of information, and by denying the supposed inevitability of neoliberal values and neoliberal librarianship.

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1. As information literacy standards are added to general education and college accreditation requirements, librarians gain a voice on the committees that shape those standards. Yet their very prominence also means that information literacy can come to define the library’s relationship with the larger institution. See Susanna M. Cowan, “Information Literacy: The Battle We Won That We Lost?,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 14, no. 1 (2014): 23–32. Thanks to Maura Seale for pointing out that not all academic library instruction programs are so tied to the ACRL’s standards. [

2. Maura Seale, "The Neoliberal Library," in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, ed. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins (Sacramento, Calif.: Library Juice Press, 2013), 51. [*Homo oeconomicus*](#) refers to the model humans used in many modern economic theories, always acting with rational disinterest to better their own state. Seale draws on Daniel B. Saunders, "Neoliberal Ideology and Public Higher Education in the United States," *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 8, no. 1 (2010): 41–77. [[↗](#)]
3. Seale, "The Neoliberal Library," 40-46. [[↗](#)]
4. The *Framework* is as of this writing (September 2014) still a work in progress. A first draft was released in February 2014, a second draft in June, and a third draft is scheduled to appear in November. [[↗](#)]
5. In particular, Heidi Jacobs has advocated an information literacy that focuses not on outcomes but on "habits of mind," parallels to which can be seen in the "dispositions" and "threshold concepts" of the *Framework*. Jacobs argues that teaching habits of mind is potentially democratizing. See Heidi L. M. Jacobs, "Minding the Gaps," *Communications in Information Literacy* 7, no. 2 (2013): 103. [[↗](#)]
6. Disclaimer: I have signed the petition linked in this paragraph. [[↗](#)]
7. David Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 37, doi:10.1177/0002716206296780. [[↗](#)]
8. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 4. [[↗](#)]
9. [*See also.*](#) [[↗](#)]
10. James F. Moore, "Predators and Prey: A New Ecology of Competition," *Harvard Business*

Review 71, no. 3 (1993): 76, 79. [↪]

11. Gregory Claeys, "The 'Survival of the Fittest' and the Origins of Social Darwinism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no. 2 (April 2000): 223, doi:10.2307/3654026. [↪]
12. Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 86. Hawkins also notes (p.153) that Karl Marx, a rather well-known critic of the marketplace, rejected the possibility that biological laws could be fruitfully applied to the study of human societies. Thanks to Ellen Adams for the reference. [↪]
13. This also serves to explain the failure of institutional repositories to gain faculty support. Many publishers only allow preprints or postprints to be uploaded. A Word document in twelve-point double-spaced Times New Roman must be unconsciously undervalued by scholars compared to a traditionally-formatted journal article. (Note: The author manages an institutional repository, and has had no more luck than anyone else in overcoming this bias). [↪]

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