

Editors' Note

Evidences, Implications, and Critical Interrogations of Neoliberalism in Information Studies: An Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

We introduce this special issue on “Evidences, Implications, and Critical Interrogations of Neoliberalism in Information Studies” in a conversational form to center the need for critical and collaborative reflection and dialogue in our work within LIS as well as our everyday lives. We wish to encourage the time and space to be witness to and translator of the invisibilize ways that neoliberalism influences the many parts of us, our relations, and daily lives.

Jamie A. Lee

As my partner prepares for her departure from academia—resignation and not retirement—in just a few months, I have been carefully and critically considering the neoliberal structures of the university. I cannot talk about all of that has prodded my partner to leave the academy as it's her story to tell; however, I can tell you that what this special issue reveals about the ill effects of neoliberalism within LIS transcends this academic space. Administrations continue to create new administrative and middle-management offices to work particularly in recruitment, retention, diversity, and inclusion. Such offices facilitate trainings and workshops and “safe spaces” while the upper management often creates policies that rely on the expression of more and more labor for our annual reviews and tenure cases. Hiring processes are frozen and salaries capped with the apparent scarcity of resources and ensuing budget austerity. With promotion and tenure, we might expect a small bump in our base pay, but the

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expectations of our labor—time, effort, and availability—increase to leave less time for research and for the joys of discovery. If you're a faculty member from a non-dominant community, you will often work to support the non-dominant students in ways that will go unnoticed in your review process. If your position is contingent, you will also be expected to take on greater teaching loads. And rarely do people talk about what's happening.

As I write, I see and experience the stress of being faculty. I see students in my graduate and undergraduate classes more and more stressed about their grades and what will become of them after graduation. In addition to my efforts as teacher and career counselor, my work in the classroom has quickly shifted to that of stress management coach and, according to one of my Teacher/Course Evaluations, "a good listener and supportive mother-type." I am reminded of the emotional labor expressed and extracted. Neoliberal structures and systems of valuation and accountability have established such issues and then made them "status quo" so that we feel that this is just how it is and we are given little space to imagine the ways that we can facilitate or make change. My hope is that this special issue is received as an urgent call for critique, transparency, and coalition as well as one for imaginings of joy and justice in and beyond our work.

Marika Cifor

I come to this special issue out of a desire make sense of the saturation of neoliberalism as ideology, practice, and process into the intersecting spheres of my personal, political, and professional life as an archival scholar, an information professional, citizen, and queer person. In my life as an educator and partner of a K-12 teacher, the many intrusions of neoliberal socio-economic structures and values into the educational field at all levels are highly visible ones. The funding implications of school choice program, the ever-increasing expectations of high stakes testing, and the associated use performance pay in an already severely undercompensated and overworked teaching profession pepper our daily conversations. Working within contexts over the last few years ranging from large public universities to small liberal arts colleges, I too have felt first-hand the far-reaching implications of the corporatization of education. Neoliberalism has contributed to the rise of unstable contract work (in libraries, archives, and throughout academia), the parallel adoption of quantifiable performance metrics as basis for pay and promotion, the dwindling of public funding for still-ostensibly public universities, and the ever-increasing pressure to accelerate the pace and efficiency of scholarly production. As someone who entered the workforce in the age of neoliberalism, I can readily see some of the myriad ways that market logics have come to shape my professional life. Yet, once one begins to work toward making visible the forces of neoliberalism that have become so naturalized and so ubiquitous that we rarely take note of them (nor are we intended to), the permeation of neoliberalism in all aspects of life begins to emerge into view. Neoliberalism reaches beyond the social, economic, and political and embeds itself

deeply into the bodily, affective, relational, and intimate. The vast breadth of its reach and its tenacity still overwhelms me. This special issue offers a means to begin to think myself out of a box, to refuse to accept neoliberalism (and its related structures of oppression and injustice) as inevitable or unchangeable.

NEOLIBERALISM AT WORK

Neoliberalism asserts that human life “can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade.”¹ To put it simply, under neoliberal models, “everything is ‘economized.’”² Neoliberal policies, practices, and processes became dominant with the administrations of Ronald Reagan (US) and Margaret Thatcher (UK). These neoliberal policies rolled back any programs associated with social welfare and in a major way helped to create a new system of global capitalism. Nearly four decades later, neoliberalism reaches across the globe and has become the sight of deep inquiry among many disciplines looking into how it has become invisible within and structures our everyday lives – from family to work to social life. Neoliberalism names a “set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the center of social life.”³ It is the “governing rationality” of our time.

Communications scholar Julie A. Wilson, in her recent book simply titled *Neoliberalism*, follows such a thread to incorporate a cultural studies approach, which she notes, “means we are interested in how neoliberalism comes to matter in and shape folks’ everyday lives and their sense of possibility.”⁴ She posits a paradox at the heart of neoliberal culture. On one hand, neoliberalism presents itself as a totalizing situation where resistance and transformation seem impossible because living in competition has come to define all aspects of our lives. On the other hand, however, neoliberalism’s power over our lives is incredibly tenuous: Wilson suggests that most of us yearn for a different world, one that is built upon and nurtures our interdependencies and shared vulnerabilities, not one that perpetuates self-enclosed individualism and living in competition. This paradox, in effect, offers glimpses of hope for change.

¹ David Harvey, “Neoliberalism and Creative Destruction,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610 (2007): 22.

² Wendy Brown, interview by Timothy Shenk, “Booked #3: What Exactly is Neoliberalism?” *Dissent Magazine*, April 2, 2015, accessed March 3, 2019, retrieved from <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/booked-3-what-exactly-is-neoliberalism-wendy-brown-undoing-the-demos>

³ Julie A. Wilson, *Neoliberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

Neoliberalism has come to define and structure our labor and work lives in detrimental ways. Whether one is positioned within academia and studying or teaching LIS, or working as an informational professional in governmental, academic, corporate, non-profit, or community settings, competition has come to form the basis of daily interactions with limiting and delimiting effects. "Competition...is heralded to ensure efficiency and incite creativity. Spurred by competition, individuals, organizations, companies, and even the government itself, will seek to optimize and innovate, creating a truly free social world where the best people and ideas come out on top."⁵ It is both problematic and exhausting to work this way. Furthermore, hegemonic hierarchies continue to exist in the workplace and beyond as people with varying degrees of privilege and access are forced to fight for the same crumbs of funding. With the capitalist market as basis for all of society, the prospect of failure, while unequally distributed, comes to define all of our lives.

As neoliberalism continues its encroachment on Library and Information Studies and its associated domains (including but not limited to archives, libraries, information policy, digital humanities, public history, communication, media studies, informatics), practitioners, scholars, and students must grapple with stark material realities through ongoing and largely unquestioned practices that continue to uphold inequalities and inequities. This special issue interrogates the diverse inner workings of neoliberalism and its reach throughout the Library and Information Studies field to collectively address and to critically engage the genealogical threads of the LIS field alongside the material evidences and implications of neoliberalism.

As co-editors of this special issue, we both are interested in the circulation of power within the archives in our respective areas of study, and how such power influences and impacts non-dominant peoples and communities. What intrigued us even more were those invisible and normalized structures of power that, as archivists and information scholars, we seldom recognized, questioned, or called out. With these threads of inquiry, we came together to collaborate on our first co-authored publication, "Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field."⁶ This work helped to spark a set of conversations about how the field might even begin to make changes considering the enormity of such a deep-seated neoliberal agenda. Critique is necessary and urgent in these times and especially in LIS. Critique is something that we all should participate in as a form of everyday intellectual work aimed at exposing the many ways that power operates and how it has produced the status-quo stories that we have been made to buy into. Neoliberalism is a way of thinking,

⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁶ Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee, "Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017).

which means that we can re-think our way out of it. Through critique, our very own lives, identities, feelings, and knowledges should be unsettled in generative ways.

“As a profession, libraries have largely embraced—or at least accepted without question—change rhetoric and corporate models,”⁷ Karen Nicolson notes. For example, for libraries, the market-focused *economization of social welfare* has meant the additional work to address social issues like education and poverty according to market logics like efficiency and consumer choice. Information environments, then, begin to incorporate market metrics in their programming as well as return on investment evaluations for further funding whether it’s institutional, corporate, foundational, or through localized philanthropic methods. People want to know what their money will do and what they will get. Efficiency means more for their buck. Neoliberalism has infused LIS discourse with rhetoric of “transformational change,” grounded in the unquestioning adoption of both neoliberal theory and practices. Along with its broader ascendancy, neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology of LIS institutions, shaping how LIS professionals and academics conceptualize their work, frame problems, and offer solutions.

In a presentation titled “The Security Archipelago,” political theorist and anthropologist Paul Amar argued that “all security is built upon insecurities, control, marking, patrol, fears, and desires (manufactured in particular...).” Considering the archives in this paradoxical positioning between security and insecurity under neoliberalism (especially in community contexts), we asked how the urgency to collect and produce archives might be inextricably connected to the urgency to secure the future within a historical context. In our previous work, we focused on developing an “archival critique”—one that is linked to an ethics of community within the professional archival community—to take a closer look and to attempt to imagine new frameworks for reading archival productions, visibility, value, participation, power, and communities. This was our starting point for this Special Issue encompassing Library and Information Studies more broadly to better understand the nuances within distinct areas of the profession and field from public and academic libraries to information and technology ethics and policy, while also recognizing our interconnected questions around the production, interpretation, translation, sharing, circulating, and destroying of information.

In order to imagine and build a world beyond neoliberalism and self-enclosed individualism, we need relevant and effective intellectual resources for political intervention and social interconnection.⁸ Competition under neoliberalism as a norm, then, has effectively crushed our capacities for coming together, trusting and caring for each other, and organizing for social change. In this special issue, the contributors have given us rich cases, in-depth analyses, concrete strategies, and calls to action around

⁷ Karen P. Nicholson, “The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries and the Value of Transformation Change,” *College and Research Libraries* 76, no. 3 (2015): 332.

⁸ Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, 5.

information literacy and access, labor and economic justice, and the increasing incursion of private institutions and values into public spaces to consider and to build upon. As co-editors, we urge you to utilize these approaches, data, and theories to inform critique in your professional work and in the everyday, to build coalitions, and work together towards liberation and justice.

The first two articles in this issue address information literacy as a distinct site of inquiry into neoliberal structures in academic librarianship and their implications for students as well as information professionals. Karen Nicholson's "On the Space/Time of Information Literacy, Higher Education, and the Global Knowledge Economy" is a theoretical analysis that draws on scholarship on space, time, and understandings of place to explore how the neoliberal university is continually re-structured through "the policies and practices of internationalization and curricular reform."⁹ Delineating the information literacy skills and standards that have emerged since Paul Zurkowski coined "information literacy" in 1974, Nicholson draws on LIS scholars to explicate just how such standards "actively produce" the decontextualized realities described simply as "accomplished teaching practices" and "competent teachers." Nicholson offers a powerful critique of the ways that "information literacy" is utilized in academic libraries in order to prove their own value in the context of the academia's "globalizing agenda" that aspires to both generate world-class research and to train students to grow into global citizens and workers.¹⁰ Again, interrogating information literacy within academic libraries, in "A Case for a Critical Information Ethics: Lessons Learned from Research Justice" Gr Keer and Jeffra Diane Bussmann situate information literacy instruction at the heart of their development of a new socially just framework through which to educate, approach, and interpret. Incorporating critical information ethics as the methodological tool for inquiry, the authors emphasize "solidarity with marginalized people and communities, respect for community knowledge, and moral integrity related to situated knowledge" as in response to their larger research question: How can librarians in higher education use principles of community engagement in information literacy instruction?¹¹ In a call to action, Keer and Bussman propose ways to incorporate critical information ethics into practice in order to identify the larger neoliberal and marginalizing systems and structures in place. Identifying neoliberalism marks an important step towards the redress of power requisite for justice. Together, these two articles on academic librarianship within neoliberalism build historical and theoretical engagement and offer tools and perspectives for

⁹ Karen Nicholson, "On the Space/Time of Information Literacy, Higher Education, and the Global Knowledge Economy," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 9. DOI: 10.24242/jclis.v2i1.86.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ Gr Keer and Jeffra Diane Bussman, "A Case for a Critical Information Ethics: Lessons Learned from Research Justice," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 2. DOI: 10.24242/jclis.v2i1.57.

intervention enabling possibilities for restorative community practices within the context of the university.

Taking up the call to action issued within the realm of information literacy, Jose Cruz Guerrero's "A Review of *Soft and Cuddly* by Jarret Kobek" attends to Kobek's tracing of the early work of Paul Zurkowski and the subsequent considerations of information literacy through both material and participatory cultures.¹² Engaging digital technologies and gaming, Guerrero explains how Kobek offers a convincing account of the limits of openness and literacy, provides evidence of neoliberalism's collusion with technology from the earliest days of the personal computer, and adds a distinct voice to the many voices critiquing technology and its discontents.

Roderic Crooks' "Acceso Libre: Equity of Access to Information through the Lens of Neo-Liberal" and Hannah Alpert-Abrams, David Bliss, and Itza Carbajal's "Post-Custodial Archiving for the Collective Good" each offer distinct case studies and critiques of community partnerships and community-focused projects, within public libraries and archives respectively and developed within neoliberal models. Crooks engages the concept of "equity of access" to examine Acceso Libre, a public library outreach program established to teach adults computer skills. Crooks carefully leads readers through about a critique of "equity of access" and its relationship to neoliberal – and what have become corporatized – understandings of individual choice and agency to uncover the shifting of responsibility away from the state and directly onto the individual for their own self-help. His case centers minoritized subjects in resource-poor communities, and powerfully asserts that "equity demands consideration of fundamental and unresolved questions of how scholars and practitioners apprehend informational needs."¹³ Crooks' work calls for a deeper engagement with "access to information" as a concept that does not suit or is no longer relevant to the work that needs to be undertaken in LIS; his work begs for critiquing such neoliberal terminology as a way to "speak truthfully about power."

Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, and Carbajal offer another rich case study from the LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections at University of Texas at Austin. Beginning at the 2015 commencement of the Benson Collections' Latin American Digital Initiatives (LADI), the authors trace the project's efforts to deploy a justice-oriented post-custodial model of archiving in order to support "a new vision of digital practice and the transnational construction of historical memory."¹⁴ Their analytic approach traces the

¹² Jose Cruz Guerrero, "A Review of *Soft & Cuddly* by Jarrett Kobek," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019). DOI: 10.24242/jclis.v2i1.89.

¹³ Roderic Crooks, "Acceso Libre: Equity of Access to Information through the Lens of Neoliberal Responsibilization," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 21. DOI: 10.24242/jclis.v2i1.91.

¹⁴ Hannah Alpert-Abrams, David Bliss, and Itza Carbajal, "Post-Custodial Archiving for the Collective Good: Examining Neoliberalism in US-Latin American Archival Partnerships," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 2. DOI: 10.24242/jclis.v2i1.87.

anti-colonial and neoliberal ideologies that have informed LADI's post-custodial model and consider post-custodial practices as a means to examine the ways that neoliberalism informs their understandings of labor, digitization, and the common good. This historical exploration marks points where their archival practices have aligned with neoliberal exploitation as well as, importantly, identifies sites of anti-neoliberal practice and thought in the archives. Through rich descriptive engagement with particular projects, these articles name the incursions of neoliberalism into practice and programs and illustrate the power of critical interventions across LIS practice.

Karly Wildenhaus' "Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries," the final perspective of this special issue, challenges the labor conditions that characterize a neoliberal LIS environment. Wildenhaus traces the history of unpaid labor and the demand for remuneration for work, from feminist strategies in the United States (1880s to 1930s) to Italy's Wages for Housework movement (1970s), to the spreading international movements often led by women. She contends that "this sentiment echoes the many paradoxes experienced by workers early in their career entering the information fields today, who must make critical decisions about how to value their own work even before they may feel they have established the power to demand a wage."¹⁵ This article critically addresses the ways that in LIS unpaid internships have become widely accepted as an entry point to the field with blatant disregard for diversity and inclusion implications. Unpaid labor is increasingly pervasive given neoliberal austerity measures. Wildenhaus identifies strategies that can be taken at the individual and institutional level to advance economic justice and the dignity of all work that occurs in our respective fields. As she concludes, "By calling for wages for intern work in each of our different positions and communities with whatever strategies are available to us, we are making a crucial assertion of the value of information work itself."

CONCLUSION

In this moment of increasing nationalism, potent white supremacy, and pervasively classed, racialized, and gendered inequities, neoliberalism flourishes as the "playing field is already stacked against various segments of society...with only a relatively small select group of capital-enhancing subjects, while everyone else is dispensable."¹⁶ As a society,

¹⁵ Karly Wildenhaus, "Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 5. DOI: 10.24242/jclis.v2i1.88.

¹⁶ Catherine Rottenberg, "Trumping it Up: Neoliberalism on Steroids," *Al Jazeera*, December 18, 2016, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/12/trumping-neoliberalism-steroids-161215144834626.html>.

as a discipline, and as a profession, critical and theoretical resources, including those offered up in this issue, will enable us in LIS to work together to imagine and to build different presents and futures. In order to move beyond the damaging constraints of living and working in competition, we need resources for pushing toward a world of living and working in common.

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