

*Article*

# Accesso Libre: Equity of Access to Information through the Lens of Neoliberal Responsibilization

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## ABSTRACT

This paper uses the concept of neoliberal responsibilization, the reductive framing of systemic power dynamics as questions of individual choice and agency, to critically interrogate equity of access to information, a central value of the broader field of library and information science (LIS). Based on a case study of Accesso Libre, a public/private partnership based in a South Los Angeles public library, I argue that equity of access to information is an insufficient concept to evaluate the power dynamics of this (and similar) partnerships, wherein powerful corporations encourage the use of commercial informational resources in minoritized communities. As an alternative, responsibilization directs analysis to different questions about equity, a set of concerns that offer LIS theorists and practitioners a way of reflecting on the ethical commitments at the core of the field.

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## INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship in the broader field of library and information science (LIS) has challenged scholars to engage with neoliberalism, an ambiguous term that can mean, among other things, a “pervasive ideology of social, political, and economic practices and processes” based on market metaphors and imagery.<sup>1</sup> As Wendy Brown defines the term, neoliberalism names a pervasive rationality of contemporary global capitalism, a general, background logic that “promises to liberate citizenship from the state, from politics, and even from concern with the social,” by recasting economic growth as an ends to good citizenship.<sup>2</sup> Neoliberal criticism focuses on the broad political and economic relations in contemporary capitalist society, “the many and varied alliances between political and other authorities that seek to govern economic activity, social life and individual conduct.”<sup>3</sup> Critics of neoliberalism who address audiences in LIS often take an accusatory tone, pointing out “the field’s embeddedness within a neoliberal political and economic context.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the increasing prevalence of articulations of neoliberalism in the academic venues of LIS (including in this journal), these exhortations proceed from the position that the field refuses or resists wrestling with this term, an assumption based on a perceived false consciousness or abdication of duty.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I will engage with concepts derived from a concern with neoliberalism, but not from the position that failing to discuss some aspect of that concept is an intellectual or moral failing. Rather, I want to suggest that an engagement with such a broad and overburdened concept as neoliberalism can be useful, that it can do needed work for scholars and for practitioners alike. I suggest that neoliberal theory – more specifically the notion of *responsibilization*, defined later in this paper as the shifting of collective economic burdens onto subjects via moral language – can do something useful in LIS.

LIS is a field cobbled together out of many theories about the worlds of information and enforces no orthodoxy about how best to address what is, according to

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<sup>1</sup> 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 (January 31, 2017): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics,” *Constellations* 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 3 -14.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Miller, and Nikolas Rose, “Governing Economic Life,” *Economy and Society* 19, no. 1 (February 1990): 191.

<sup>4</sup> Maura Seale, “The Neoliberal Library,” in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, edited by Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 58.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Lawson, Kevin Sanders, and Lauren Smith, “Commodification of the Information Profession: A Critique of Higher Education Under Neoliberalism,” *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* 3, no. 1 (2015).

its own theories, the cacophonous, disjointed, messy worlds of information.<sup>6</sup> Theory (neoliberal or otherwise) can be used as a hermeneutic device, a method “for treating problems of the interpretation of human actions, texts and other meaningful material.”<sup>7</sup> The power relations described by neoliberal critique – and so frequently neglected in literature concerned with the pragmatics of doing library outreach – can bolster ways of thinking through the fundamental assumptions of contemporary LIS. For example, Nicholson uses neoliberal theory to reevaluate information literacy, arguing that the concept itself reduces individuals and their accumulated knowledge to interchangeable economic components.<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, I visit the concept of equity of access, a term of great significance in theory, policy, and professional practice. This analysis examines a public library outreach program called Accesso Libre,<sup>9</sup> a short-lived public/private partnership that aimed to teach adults computer skills. This exploration of equity of access to information viewed via responsibilization will insist that equity of access must account for the entanglements with private and state power that inhere in institutional formations and the kinds of audience imagined for these outreach efforts. Responsibilization shows how the concept of equity as figured by Accesso Libre occludes a fuller accounting for the relations of power already present in the community and its interaction with the library.

This paper contributes to the emerging LIS literature on neoliberalism in two ways: first, it offers an empirical description of an LIS outreach program specific to library service in the minoritized<sup>10</sup> communities of South Los Angeles but also typical of American public library efforts to enact equity of access to information. Second, this paper demonstrates how neoliberal theory (in the form of the term responsibilization) offers a tool for examining latent economic and political aspects of LIS concepts,

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Buckland, “Information as Thing,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42, no. 2 (1991): 351–62.

<sup>7</sup> C. Mantzavinos. and Edward Zalta, “Hermeneutics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Palo Alto, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/hermeneutics/>.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholson, Karen, “Information Literacy as a Situated Practice in the Neoliberal University,” In *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of CAIS / Actes Du Congrès Annuel de l'ACSI*, edited by Matthew Griffis, Heidi Julien, and Lisa Given (St. Catharines, Ontario: Brock University, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> To preserve anonymity, the public/private partnership and its host library have been given pseudonyms.

<sup>10</sup> As opposed to terms like underrepresented, minority, or underserved, “minoritized” draws attention to the historical specificity of American racial and sexual hierarchy and the multiplicity of identities. Following the work of Muñoz in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), I use this term as a way to point to social location relative to the persistent white supremacy, economic precarity, heteronormativity, and misogyny of contemporary American life.

specifically the concept of equity of access to information. In what follows, I first describe a public/private partnership offered to community members and the tepid response this program received from its intended beneficiaries. In the analysis that follows, I take up the concept of responsibilization to re-examine this episode. In this staging, a different set of questions emerges, questions which underscore the importance of keeping open certain ways of thinking that are foreclosed and blocked using only terms available from within the “closed system” of LIS terminology.<sup>11</sup>

### CLEARING THE GROUND: WHO'S AFRAID OF NEOLIBERALISM?

In this section, I bring together two previously parallel topics in the scholarly literature: equity of access to information and responsibilization. First, I briefly summarize equity of access to information, a foundational concept in contemporary LIS theory and professional education. As I will show, the most common way of talking about access concerns distribution of vital goods and assiduously ignores the dynamics that produce inequity in the first place. It is here, in the dynamics that equity of access to information does not interrogate, that a judicious use of neoliberal theory can help broaden the ethical scope of LIS.

Equity of access to information stands as a central professional ethic of the library and information fields; it is a normative principle that orders, legitimates, and shapes an incredibly broad and complex set of activities, from the placement of artifacts in space to the lobbying of lawmaking bodies to the design of digital services and systems. Access, and its attendant enactments, constitute the collective stance of the LIS professions on how people should interact with information and what kinds of societal and individual benefits ensue from such action. Particularly in the case of public libraries, policy makers and professionals tout equity of access to information as a social good that promotes democratic societies.<sup>12</sup>

For the purposes of the present argument, it will suffice to note that the virtue of equity of access to information derives largely from a Rawlsian framing, the view that information is a vital good needed by contemporary humans to live.<sup>13</sup> Critically, LIS articulations of the virtue of equity of access address various technologies *in the same way*, in effect extending to any digital artifact or system the same ethical status as any

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<sup>11</sup> Seale, “The Neoliberal Library.”

<sup>12</sup> For examples of how this virtue is articulated, the American Library Association hosts “Quotes about Libraries and Democracy” at <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/officers/past/kranich/demo/quotes>.

<sup>13</sup> Leah A. Lievrouw, and Sharon E. Farb, “Information and Equity,” *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 37, no. 1 (January 31, 2005): 499–540.

other digital object or even that of an analog book. This framing is made explicit in the professional code of the American Library Association's definition of equity of access:

Equity of access means that all people have the information they need – regardless of age, education, ethnicity, language, income, physical limitations or geographic barriers. It means they are able to obtain information in a variety of formats – electronic, as well as print.<sup>14</sup>

The univocal commitment to access carries important epistemological heft. Discourse based around access forecloses particular kinds of analysis, presupposing as it does a focus on distributive ethics, on the equitable distribution of some *thing* called access. Access implies a world where level of access is known and knowable, where nearness to artifacts and systems leads inexorably to beneficial use.<sup>15</sup> In effect, interest in equity ends with proximity: how users arrived at conditions of inequality is expressly not at issue. In the Global North and, later, in the Global South, access to various kinds of information technology (including the kinds of computers and web-based informational resources that will be included in the case study to follow) has spread continuously and unevenly over various demographic groups in the last two decades.<sup>16</sup> Poorer communities and communities of color are often viewed as bereft of the beneficial aspects of information technology, although many forms of contemporary technology exacerbate existing inequalities in these communities.<sup>17</sup>

If equity of access to information takes a narrow view of informational phenomena, theories of neoliberalism take the opposite tack, focusing on the broad contours of power, the state, and the formation of subjects. In all of its ever-changing definitions, neoliberalism is an undemocratic and deceptive ordering of the global economic system for strategic accumulation of economic benefits, a hidden meta-system “invested in consolidating wealth and power within the upper class through dispossession and oppression of non-elites.”<sup>18</sup> Neoliberalism is something to be unmasks, attacked,

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<sup>14</sup> American Library Association (ALA), *Equity of Access*, ALAACTION No.5, Equity Brochure, n.d., <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/missionhistory/keyactionareas/equityaction/equitybrochure>.

<sup>15</sup> Christo Sims, “From Differentiated Use to Differentiating Practices: Negotiating Legitimate Participation and the Production of Privileged Identities,” *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 6 (July 3, 2014): 670–82.

<sup>16</sup> Barney Warf, “Contemporary Digital Divides in the United States,” *Journal of Economic & Social Geography* 104, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 1–17.

<sup>17</sup> Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Seale, “The Neoliberal Library,” 40.

and resisted, or, when invoked to characterize an opponent's argument, a kind of barb that can be used to skewer disfavored authors or movements.<sup>19</sup>

Neoliberalism has been defined and redefined extensively in many literatures. As Wendy Brown argues, neoliberalism names a family of concepts derived from an ongoing, societal *economization*, the tendency to subsume all domains of life into economic models, processes, and terms.<sup>20</sup> Brown argues that neoliberal economization "names the practices that differentially value and govern life in terms of their ability to contribute to the gross domestic product (GDP) of the nation." She also cautions that neoliberalism, although quite real and consequential, makes for a slippery object of study:

[I]n its differential instantiation across countries, regions, and sectors, in its differential intersection with extant cultures and political traditions, and above all, in its convergences and uptakes of other discourses and developments, neoliberalism takes diverse shapes and spawns diverse content and normative details, even different idioms. It is globally ubiquitous yet disunified and non-identical with itself, in space and over time.

From this perspective, scholars might think of neoliberalism as a set of critical writings that focus attention on something large, intricate, and specific that might otherwise escape notice.<sup>21</sup>

Neoliberalism then is both ideology and policy. The term neoliberalism itself references the liberal subject, a retroactive creation of various threads of philosophical thought rather than a coherent, successive creation of a unified project of study.<sup>22</sup> Neoliberal policy, by distinction, is a series of reforms enacted in Western representative democracies aimed at increasing international trade; reducing the role of the state in the economy<sup>23</sup>; selling publicly owned resources; lowering progressive taxation rates; and using privately owned corporations or non-state organizations to provide public

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<sup>19</sup> Cornel West, "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/17/ta-nehisi-coates-neoliberal-black-struggle-cornel-west>.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, "Sacrificial Citizenship," 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>22</sup> William Grampp, "On the History of Thought and Policy," *The American Economic Review* 55, nos. 1/2 (March 1, 1965): 128–35.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan D. Ostry, Prakash Loungani, and Davide Furceri, "Neoliberalism: Oversold?" *Finance & Development*, International Monetary Fund, June 2016, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2016/06/ostry.htm>.

services.<sup>24</sup> Neoliberal policy speaks to a philosophy of governance that enacts economization and aspires to liberate autonomous, rational actors from interference by overactive state planning (imagined as a socialist regime or even as a set of democratically approved Keynesian interventions) via “an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”<sup>25</sup> Scholars in the 1990s incorporated Foucauldian conceptions of governmentality to explain the way these policy decisions had come to seem inevitable and to highlight the variety of indirect mechanisms modern liberal democracies have at their disposal to shape the life of citizens, or, more to the point, to instill in people a way of self-disciplining in response to the worldview of certain kinds of experts, especially economists.<sup>26</sup> In the many fields of study where it is used, interest in neoliberal theory in the last thirty years concerns

...different ways that modern systems of rule have depended upon a complex set of relations between state and non-state authorities, upon infrastructural powers, upon networks of power, upon the activities of authorities who do not form part of the formal or informal state apparatus.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the many fields where it is employed and the variety of forms it takes, neoliberalism names a political economic complex that shares several basic features: economization, the use of market metaphors and imagery to describe all domains of life, including moral and civic aspects<sup>28</sup>; incorporation of language of personal choice as a tool of government<sup>29</sup>; and, most importantly for this paper, responsibilization of individual citizens for systemic conditions.<sup>30</sup> As Brown writes, neoliberalism demands that human beings behave as if they were themselves corporations engaged in a highly idealized version of some market:

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<sup>24</sup> Bob Jessop, “Liberalism, Neoliberalism, and Urban Governance: A State-Theoretical Perspective,” *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (June 2002): 452–72.

<sup>25</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Miller and Rose, “Governing Economic Life.”

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Neoliberal Revolution,” *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 6 (November 2011): 705–728; Ronen Shamir, “The Age of Responsibilization: On Market-Embedded Morality,” *Economy and Society* 37, no. 1 (February 2008): 1–19.

<sup>29</sup> Graham Burchell, “Liberal Government and Techniques of the Self,” *Economy and Society* 22, no. 3 (August 1, 1993): 267–82.

<sup>30</sup> Alison Howell, “Resilience as Enhancement: Governmentality and Political Economy beyond ‘Responsibilization,’” *Politics* 35, no. 1 (February 2015): 67–71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12080>.

Far from wantonly appetitive or indulgent, to survive and thrive [subjects] must pursue careful strategies of investment, capital enhancement, leveraging, cost reduction, adaptation to changing environments and new challenges, and sustain high credit ratings.<sup>31</sup>

As a second caution, scholars must also recognize that tension, ambiguity, and incommensurability obtain within LIS as well, compounding the potential for an engagement with a loosely defined term to misfire. Neoliberal theory is vast and unwieldy, and should be taken up with a certain pronounced ambivalence, a theme I will return to in the conclusion of this paper. Despite these significant risks, several works in LIS have profitably used neoliberalism as a tool to interpret and reinterpret LIS concepts.<sup>32</sup>

In what follows, I focus in particular on responsibilization, the reductive framing of systemic power dynamics as questions of individual choice and agency.<sup>33</sup> Responsibilization concerns the continual reduction in direct expenditures of the state on the welfare of citizens, a way in which successive changes in funding and policy “shift responsibility from the state to the subject by responsibilizing them for their own self-help in dealing with increasing uncertainties and potentially traumatic events (terrorist attacks, natural disasters, civil disorder, financial crises, etc.),” often by rhetorically focusing on language of moral duty and agency.<sup>34</sup> Responsibilization directs our analysis toward the economic and political inequalities exacerbated by neoliberal policy and away from the ways that individual persons navigate market-like choices. Responsibilization can take place explicitly (as when a user signs a legal agreement indemnifying a service provider for harms caused by security breaches<sup>35</sup>) or implicitly (as when discourses on education describe unequal distribution of resources between communities as a question of “school choice”<sup>36</sup>). As Cifor and Lee write, neoliberal governance entails harmful forms of inequality, the management of which becomes a duty to be fulfilled by subjects:

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<sup>31</sup> Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship,” 3.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Cope, “Neoliberalism and Library & Information Science: Using Karl Polanyi’s Fictitious Commodity as an Alternative to Neoliberal Conceptions of Information,” *Progressive Librarian: A Journal for Critical Studies & Progressive Politics in Librarianship*, no. 43 (Winter 2014/2015): 67-89.

<sup>33</sup> Marjo Siltaoja, Virpi Malin, and Miikka Pykkönen, “We Are All Responsible Now”: Governmentality and Responsibilized Subjects in Corporate Social Responsibility,” *Management Learning* 46, no. 4 (September 2015): 44–60.

<sup>34</sup> Howell, “Resilience as Enhancement,” 69.

<sup>35</sup> Rachel Bunker, “The Equifax Way,” *Jacobin*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/09/equifax-retail-credit-company-discrimination-loans>.

<sup>36</sup> Kristen L Buras, and Michael W. Apple, “School Choice, Neoliberal Promises, and Unpromising Evidence,” *Educational Policy* 19, no. 3 (July 2005): 550–564.

Neoliberalism is a governing rationality that creates conditions of social injustice, placing the needs and interests of some social groups above those of others and, thereby, at the expense of others through the disparate distribution of material resources, and social, civil, and human benefits, rights, protections, and opportunities.<sup>37</sup>

Responsibilization denies a collective or social level of analysis because neoliberal economization traffics ontologically in markets and buyers to the exclusion of humans and their other collectivities. A focus on responsibilization forces the analyst to ask, “For what have individual members of this community been *made* responsible and what other alternatives exist?”

## METHODS

The case study described here derives from a larger ethnographic project. An ethnographic text is a “thick description” of a cultural situation, one shaped both by the researcher’s subjective understanding of the world and by participants’ actions and explanations for these behaviors.<sup>38</sup> The ethnographer often begins with a social phenomenon rather than a hypothesis; prefers the collection of unstructured data; looks at a single case or small number of cases; and generally analyzes the data without any predetermined, codified scheme.<sup>39</sup> Ethnography, with its emphasis on the co-constitutive nature of culture and meaning, has been used to richly describe the great variety of activities, explanations, and performances that constitute use of information technology specifically<sup>40</sup> and information more generally.<sup>41</sup> Ethnographic research relies on intensive and long-term participant-observation, during which researchers enter into and engross themselves in a field site. Researchers observe research subjects as they go about their lives, jobs, and routines. Participant-observation can take a number of stances with respect to a researcher’s social and physical distance from subjects, ranging from very distant, unobtrusive observation of subjects, to eliciting responses specifically for

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<sup>37</sup> Cifor and Lee, “Archival Critique,” 4.

<sup>38</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>39</sup> Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 3rd ed (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Roderic N. Crooks, “Times Thirty: Access, Maintenance, and Justice,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 44, no. 1 (January 2019): 118–42.

doi:10.1177/0162243918783053. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243918783053>.

<sup>41</sup> Kirsty Williamson, “Research in Constructivist Frameworks Using Ethnographic Techniques.,” *Library Trends* 55, no. 1 (2006): 83–101.

research purposes, to working closely and intensively alongside subjects.<sup>42</sup> Researchers, depending on the dictates of the setting, try to develop local understandings and obey local customs, even as their status as researcher inevitably frustrates these attempts.<sup>43</sup> The case constructed here is useful to think with, an important example that demonstrates a particular series of events and provides a meaningful example from which to generalize based on observed dynamics.<sup>44</sup>

Applied to professional settings, ethnography is an interpretivist social science tool<sup>45</sup> that shows how organizational structure manifests in attitudes and actions, how particular people understand a job, a profession, and the broader society.<sup>46</sup> Institutional ethnography, “a sociological method of inquiry which problematizes social relations at the site of lived experience” has been a useful approach for understanding how people in a community bounded by a specific institution live with various forms of information technology and how they coordinate collective action around ideas, texts, and documents.<sup>47</sup>

Ethnographic method frequently includes open-ended, semi-structured interviews.<sup>48</sup> The form and content of such interviews depends greatly on the setting and the various contingencies and demands that arise from the field site itself. Interviews can incorporate objects, artefacts, photographs, and other prompts, which are used to generate conversation and encourage research subjects to vocalize their thoughts. These methods allow ethnographers to attend to the “heteroglot” speech of institutions and corporations, the way that complex organizations mobilize multiple actors to communicate complex and conflicting messages through channels public and private.<sup>49</sup> Data collection for the larger ethnographic project took place from 2013-2015. The current paper concerns a single event, an adult education class for parents organized by a public library in cooperation with a high school and a church using funds and devices

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<sup>42</sup> David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step-by-Step*, 3rd ed (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Michael Agar, *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1996).

<sup>44</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, “Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (April 1, 2006): 219–245, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>.

<sup>45</sup> Williamson, “Research in Constructivist Frameworks,” 83.

<sup>46</sup> Randy Hodson, “A Meta-Analysis of Workplace Ethnographies: Race, Gender, and Employee Attitudes and Behaviors,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 33, no. 1 (February 1, 2004): 4–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241603259808>.

<sup>47</sup> Kevin Walby, “Institutional Ethnography and Surveillance Studies: An Outline for Inquiry,” *Surveillance & Society* 3, nos. 2/3 (2002): 190.

<sup>48</sup> Hammersley & Atkinson, *Ethnography*, 97.

<sup>49</sup> Nick Seaver, “Algorithms as Culture: Some Tactics for the Ethnography of Algorithmic Systems,” *Big Data & Society* 4, no. 2 (December 2017): 1-12, doi:10.1177/2053951717738104.

donated by corporations. Data consists of field notes written at the site, video recordings, photographs, participant-observation, interviews, and review of documents produced by library staff or others that related to the program. I attended a recruitment fair for the class at the local high school, another day-long event at a local church, and the class itself, which took place on February 12, 2015.

### CASE STUDY: *ACCESSO LIBRE*

In this section, I turn to the empirical portion of this paper, a case study that is part of a larger ethnographic project about the use of mobile technology in the segregated public schools of South Los Angeles and the communities of color these schools serve.<sup>50</sup> In 2015, I observed the planning stages, recruitment activities, and initial meeting of a public/private partnership called Accesso Libre, a series of free classes planned, executed, and staffed by the South Park branch of the city's library system. Conceived for the benefit of adults in the library's vicinity, a larger than average percentage of whom are undocumented and/or have limited proficiency in English, the program was promoted to library patrons, parishioners of a local Catholic church, and parents at neighboring schools. All names of persons and individual institutions are aliases.

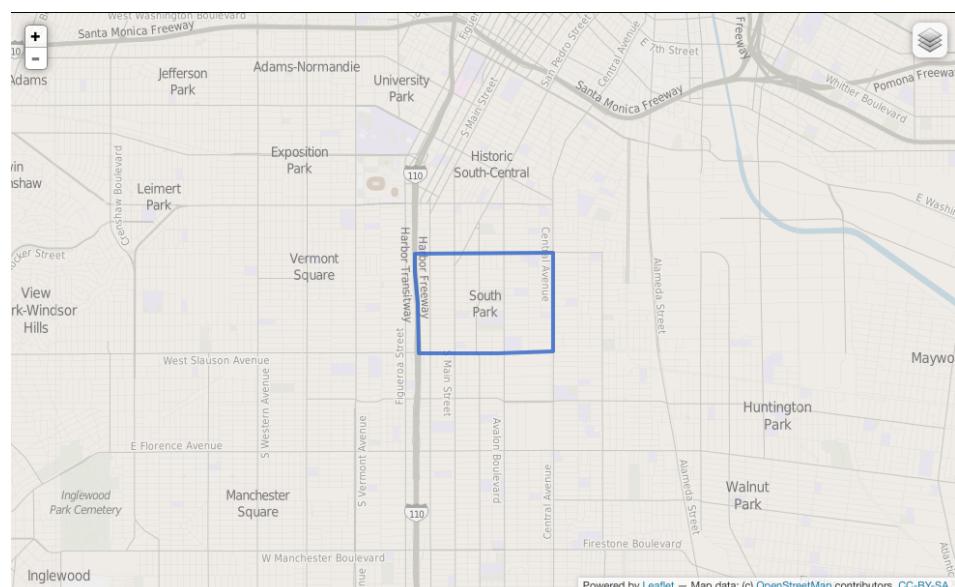


Figure 1. Map of the South Park neighborhood in South Los Angeles.

<sup>50</sup> Crooks, "Times Thirty," 118.

South Park is a part of South Los Angeles, the largest division of the city of Los Angeles; local media often use the term “South Los Angeles” (or, prior to 2003, “South Central Los Angeles”)<sup>51</sup> as a blanket term to specify the black and Latino parts of the city south of the 10 freeway. South Park is a lower-income, primarily Latino neighborhood. According to the most recent census data, the neighborhood is 78.6% Latino and 19.2% black.<sup>52</sup> Relative to the Los Angeles metro area as a whole, South Park is racially segregated, consisting almost entirely of black and Latino residents. The median household income of \$29,518 is low for both the city and the county. The population density and the ratio of single-parent families are among the highest in the city and county; the average age and educational attainment of residents are among the lowest.<sup>53</sup>

In the two years leading up to the class, the branch librarian in charge of Accesso Libre had successfully secured private funding from several technology-related concerns to supplement her library’s budget for outreach programming, including various grants of money, service, software, or hardware from Google, Microsoft, and other tech sector sponsors. Using these resources, the librarian had successfully conducted workshops for neighborhood children and young adults, including classes or events related to robotics, animation, and computer programming. As she explained her exceptional efforts to develop programming for the community, “It’s all about access for us.” Accesso Libre then was conceived as merely the most recent instantiation of the ongoing promotion of equity of access to information in general and access to newer forms of information technology more specifically. Accesso Libre aimed to serve a diagnosed need in the community: access to information technology and support for lifelong learning. As the librarian explained it, people in the neighborhood could benefit from access to information technology for their own needs. Expanding their familiarity with digital technology would also allow adults to support their children’s coursework and homework, both of which increasingly required some kind of rudimentary computer skills. In addition to recruiting at the local church and at local public schools, the library also partnered with a community college. The community college provided an instructor for the class and would offer college credit for any parent/student who wished to enroll on an ongoing basis. In this respect, Accesso Libre represents a complex institutional identity, a product of public and private resources directed to neighborhood residents to foster particular kinds of uses of commercial technologies.

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<sup>51</sup> Calvin Sims, “In Los Angeles, It’s South-Central No More,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/10/us/in-los-angeles-it-s-south-central-no-more.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Los Angeles Times Data Desk, “South Park Profile,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2009, sec. “Mapping L.A.” <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/south-park/>.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



Figure 2. A library paraprofessional demonstrates how to use an online public access catalog to Accesso Libre's students using a computer donated by a corporate sponsor.

The first (and final) Accesso Libre class took place on February 12, 2015. At the designated start time, the instructor explained to the 12 adults assembled in a classroom that the class would need 25 students or could not run ("No va," she joked). Already, the future of the class was in jeopardy because not enough parents in the community had agreed to participate. A librarian, a library paraprofessional, and a student volunteer from a local high school served as facilitators for the 12 students. All but one of the students were women. Two students brought children with them, a reflection of the highly circumscribed and gendered aspects of childcare in the community. The instructor asked the class if they wanted her to speak in English or Spanish. Unanimously, the class asked for Spanish instruction. Agreeing to the request, the instructor asked (in both English and then immediately in Spanish) what kinds of things the class might like to do with computers. No student would provide an answer. Graciously accepting the silence of the class, the instructor promised she would take questions in Spanish at any time and respond in both Spanish and English. This would be a class "*sin estrés*" ("without stress"), she explained.

For the next 90 minutes, the instructor playfully walked students through a typical computer literacy introductory class, one that did not presume any familiarity with a computer. She demonstrated how to turn on a computer, log in to a guest account, and open up a web browser. She explained the desktop metaphor and the difference between hardware and software. She solicited the names of all the parts of the computer from the shy, reticent class: *pantalla, impresora, programas, basura* (screen, printer, programs, trash).

As the class progressed, several dynamics played out. First, many of the novice users in the class had heard of or used various commercial informational resources (e.g., Facebook and Google), but none of them had any self-identified informational needs that could be made intelligible to the instructor. The instructor suggested several uses of a computer and a web browser, guiding her students through what was (for some) their first web search, but each student failed to produce a search string relevant to a genuine informational need when prompted. Tellingly, when the instructor suggested searching for and printing a recipe, students could name no recipe they were interested in finding (or any other reference material, for that matter). Second, while they were able to effect a directed web search, no student proved adept enough to use the library's online public access catalog, largely because the steps to filling out a web form were too complex and the information requested by the web page was deemed by at least one participant as too invasive. Another student demonstrated that she could already use the Facebook app on her smartphone and, therefore, had no need of learning how to use a computer. Finally, many of the students seemed both amused and frustrated by the class. In joking conversations, students expressed many reservations about the use of computers: that computers were expensive, that they were for young people, and that, unless you could type, it was easier to use a phone to find information.

At the end of the class, the instructor outlined areas they might visit in subsequent lessons, such as looking for jobs using a commercial website such as Monster or LinkedIn, searching the community college website for classes to take, or using the library's e-books portal. No student returned for subsequent class meetings and the class was canceled. *Acceso Libre* only met once.

## NEOLIBERAL HERMENEUTICS

There are endless ways to read this case: as a mismatch between library outreach and the community's needs, as an example of the difficulties of adult education, as a failure of select individuals to correctly develop important computer-related skills for their own economic advancement. In this section, I address this case in terms of equity of access to information, reading this concept through the lens of responsibilization. To be clear, I do not wish to imply that library staff failed in their duties in any way or that they should have offered some other kind of outreach: to the contrary, I interpret their work in this

area as deeply informed by care work, as a genuine attempt to address economic, social, and political neglect in the communities of South Los Angeles.<sup>54</sup> It is my argument in this paper that taking up responsibilization can teach us how better to sharpen the ethical commitment to equity of access to information and, by extension, other matters of care in LIS. As the preceding text has made clear, equity of access is an important concept in LIS, but it is also the product of a “closed system” that rests chiefly on self-reference.<sup>55</sup>

Equity of access achieves a common-sense status precisely because it does not engage with any exploration of power relations that might trouble it. In this section, I use the concept of neoliberal responsibilization as a tool to enrich the problematic of access (and of Accesso Libre). Responsibilization “discursively and ethically converts the worker, student, poor person, parent, or consumer into one whose moral duty is to pursue savvy self-investment and entrepreneurial strategies of self-care.”<sup>56</sup> Responsibilization is an aspect of neoliberal theory interested in three closely related dynamics: the redrawing of the boundaries between the public and private, denying the collectivity of communities, and the internalization of market logics to discipline subjects.<sup>57</sup>

### Redrawing the Public and Private Sphere

First, responsibilization directs us to question the unstable and unresolved division of the public and the private sphere. The ongoing cannibalization of the public sphere by for-profit entities is the stage upon which responsibilization occurs. Neoliberalism entails a steady reduction in direct public welfare expenditures, promoting an environment of economic austerity.<sup>58</sup> In all its various guises, neoliberalism uses policy to reduce public resources available freely to all, often by selling these publicly owned goods and services.<sup>59</sup> As a kind of hybrid enterprise, Accesso Libre makes manifest the logic of responsibilization in the delivery of vital public services, in this case the vital good of information. Public/private partnership is itself a significant form of neoliberal

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<sup>54</sup> Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, “Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things,” *Social Studies of Science* 41, no. 1 (February 2011): 85–106.

<sup>55</sup> Seale, “The Neoliberal Library.”

<sup>56</sup> Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship,” 9.

<sup>57</sup> Suzan Ilcan, “Privatizing Responsibility: Public Sector Reform under Neoliberal Government.” *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie* 46, no. 3(2009): 207–34.

<sup>58</sup> Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship,” 9.

<sup>59</sup> Nikolas Rose, and Peter Miller, “Political Power beyond the State: Problematics of Government,” In *Foucault and Law*, edited by Peter Fitzpatrick (London: Routledge, 2010): 191.

responsibilization, “drawing on hybrid forms of governance, whereby individuals and other non-state actors assume responsibility for a range of social issues.”<sup>60</sup>

The neoliberal technique of drawing private actors into the provision of public services to address inequality (rather than having the state directly provide benefits) means that for community members to address their needs (in this case, informational needs) they must turn to new kinds of relationships with private companies that mediate the distribution of primary goods. Ironically, public/private partnerships are tasked with repairing “rollbacks on economic safety nets, such as welfare and public housing, that have devastated low-income communities, which disproportionately comprise people of color.”<sup>61</sup> In these communities, austerity takes racialized and discriminatory forms: an undocumented person in California may not receive direct public assistance for housing, food, healthcare, or any other basic necessity.<sup>62</sup> That these vulnerabilities are imagined to be satisfied by informational resources provided by corporate sponsors is no coincidence. “Corporate responsibility” campaigns often provide resources to minoritized communities in exchange for reputational benefits and maintenance of brand identity.<sup>63</sup> Responsibilization then amounts to a transfer of political power from democratically elected governments to already rich and powerful corporations, which often receive reductions in tax liabilities in exchange for their sponsorships.<sup>64</sup> However well-intentioned these efforts at community sponsorships are, the use of this form promotes a structural problem:

Unaccountability has become the rule amongst the most powerful players of the globalization age. Most decision-making processes involving corporate elites, including those dealing with public money, are shrouded in secrecy, opacity and omissions, and sheltered from public view by lobbying and spinning.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Sonia Bookman, and Cheryl Martens, “Responsibilization and Governmentality in Brand-Led Social Partnerships,” in *Social Partnerships and Responsible Business: A Research Handbook*, edited by Maria May Seitanidi and Andrew Crane (London: Routledge, 2014): 288–305.

<sup>61</sup> Rickke Mananzala, and Dean Spade, “The Nonprofit Industrial Complex and Trans Resistance,” *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 5, no. 1 (2008): 55.

<sup>62</sup> Jeffrey T. Kullgren, “Restrictions on Undocumented Immigrants’ Access to Health Services: The Public Health Implications of Welfare Reform.” *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 10 (October 2003): 1630–33.

<sup>63</sup> Bookman and Martens, “Responsibilization and Governmentality in Brand-Led Social Partnerships”; Siltaoja, Malin, and Pyykkönen, “We Are All Responsible Now.”

<sup>64</sup> Mananzala and Spade, “The Nonprofit Industrial Complex and Trans Resistance.”

<sup>65</sup> Daniele Conversi, “Majoritarian Democracy and Globalization versus Ethnic Diversity?” *Democratization* 19, no. 4 (August 2012): 790.

Further, a certain contradiction emerges in the promotion of civil society via the largely private platforms and tools of digital commerce. Equity of access to information does not include a provision about who should own information or the digital data by which it is constituted: it occludes such accounting, focusing exclusively on whether a given user has whatever service she is imagined to desire at a particular moment. While the public library as an institution aspires to serve the public sphere, its outreach project via private partnership lends the commercial search engines and social networking sites it tacitly promotes a veneer of respectability. This does not suggest that the library should not teach selected users how to use Google, Facebook, or any other commercial informational resource, although in this case, many of the students did not see the benefit of learning how to do so or already had means of using these services.

What responsibilization highlights here is the way that the library, a publicly funded entity struggling in an environment of austerity, valorizes particular commercial products provided by its institutional partners whose forms of governance do not support the library's mission. Responsibilization forces new questions in thinking of equity: how is it that private corporations are implicated in the delivery of goods and services needed to live and what does this mode of service entail? Equity of access then might incorporate ways of understanding or resisting the commercialization of information, or, at the very least, a way of examining these complexities.<sup>66</sup>

### Resonsibilized Communities

Secondly, responsibilization directs us to examine the mobilization of responsible citizenship, the way that civic participation can be invoked to transfer responsibility from the state to individual persons or communities "through locally implementing norms of conduct."<sup>67</sup> Community is a loaded term, one that has often been coopted by various actors for strategic advantage. In the literature on neoliberal theory, community figures as both strategy of resistance to and unwitting tool of oppression. Communities living under neoliberal policy figure as sites of social change and political organizing, but also "arenas that are constrained in their capacities to host such efforts."<sup>68</sup>

In this framing, several resources are deemed vital or needed by the community as a whole. In the case of Accesso Libre, these were computers and the knowledge of how to use them for homework, searching for jobs, or looking for information such as recipes. The valorization of these particular goods does not depend on any single person's life

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<sup>66</sup> Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 152.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, "Sacrificial Citizenship," 5.

<sup>68</sup> James Defilippis, Robert Fisher, and Eric Shragge, "Neither Romance nor Regulation: Re-Evaluating Community," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30, no. 3 (September 2006): 673.

circumstances or any specific aspect of a biography. Instead, they have been deemed necessary to community life by the public library and its partners so that community members may participate in public life and fulfill duties expected of all members of society. Community members are taken to be deficient in the capacities that would allow them to fulfill their civic duties and enjoy full economic citizenship. Eliminating these deficiencies via adult education becomes a moral duty for the library and also for individual students.

Responsibilization attunes scholarship to inauthentic or incomplete invocations of community. Given the persistent conditions of economic disinvestment in the racially segregated communities of South Los Angeles, this framing of community as a collection of autonomous individuals proves inapt.<sup>69</sup> Such economic models of community delete and omit very common features of life in favor of purely economic measures, a move that requires erasing valuable forms of reproductive labor that make participation in the economy possible in the first place. This presence is visible in the photographs of Acceso Libre: children — whose need for care are not recognized in the rigid calculus of acquiring skills to meet the fickle demands of labor markets — appear in class but do not count toward the enrollment targets set by the public/private partnership.

What responsibilization indicates here is the way that equity of access automatically parses equity into an individual need. Informational resources are always extended to individual persons. Responsibilized communities are targeted for state disinvestment but at the same time are forced to respond as individuals. A more energized notion of equity of access might allow that informational needs can inhere in different kinds of collectivities: in families, in blocks, in schools, in language groups and so on. Can a community as a whole have a right to information in a variety of formats to serve its needs or must these needs always be addressed as an individual person's desire to view or not to view a particular resource?

### Responsibilized Selves

Finally, responsibilization entails the means by which rule is internalized by subjects, the way language and discourse shape political thought to the advantage of experts and elites before the conversation has begun.<sup>70</sup> Central to this process of managing the self are the use of market metaphors and imagery to describe all domains of life.<sup>71</sup> The concept of the market plays a central role in this diffusion of control from authorities out into the world: the market is an imaginary construct that guides interactions with others.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Jao Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and the Meaning of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>70</sup> Burchell, "Liberal Government and Techniques of the Self."

<sup>71</sup> Murphy, *The Economization of Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 5-7.

<sup>72</sup> Taylor, Charles, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

In the case of Accesso Libre, one such vector of internalized rule is in the burden on individuals to learn needed skills in order to adapt to changes in the economy. This burden on individuals valorizes the accumulation of skills that might prove useful or desirable in labor markets. In this way, an emphasis on “lifelong learning” transmutes market value into moral, emotional, and psychological value.<sup>73</sup> Equity of access does not question the power of corporations to shape labor markets or unceremoniously dispense with workers (or whole professions): instead, it takes as given that lifelong learning is a virtuous behavior, irrespective of the deskilling and precarity that produce in workers the need to constantly train and retrain throughout their working lives.

Thinking in terms of responsibilization calls attention here to how equity of access operates on moral terms, where a refusal to contribute “lifelong” effort to remaining economically viable can be viewed as a character flaw. What kinds of equity might we imagine that proceed from other models of personhood and other affective connections? How can equity be expanded to promote respect for human personhood removed from the dictates of labor markets? What kinds of worth have no economic equivalent?

## CONCLUSION

Information technologies themselves, whatever their benefits and however valuable the communication they enable, position users as resources in networks of global capital: this is the inescapable physics of the new media economy. Access means capture. If we allow that a particular person, group, or community has a right to access, we simultaneously affirm the political demands and entanglements of that technology and open up a site for private parties to pursue their interests. Access to digital technology implicates users in complex webs of relations to political bodies, commercial interests, and fellow citizens *differently* than does access to physical library spaces or analog books.

To be clear, the attempt here is not to discourage efforts by library professionals or LIS scholars to address community needs, democratic participation, or various forms of literacy. To the contrary, my interpretation is meant to bring forth the richness, vitality, and political edge of equity of access to information, to look for ways to extend and enliven it. That is to say, the increasingly complex nature of information (especially information technology) and its mediation of various realms of life call for an attention to the vagaries and conflicts in which we are already entangled. Access, far from being a simple binarism, is a nuanced and ambiguous dynamic, particularly in light of the reciprocal demands on users of contemporary digital technologies. Responsibilization offers a way to grasp some of this complexity. As it concerns the responsibilization of

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<sup>73</sup> Ondrej Kačák, and Branislav Pupala. “Governmentality - Neoliberalism - Education: The Risk Perspective.” *Journal of Pedagogy* 2, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 145.

minoritized subjects in poorer communities, equity demands consideration of fundamental and unresolved questions of how scholars and practitioners apprehend informational needs.

Ambivalence figures prominently in the story of Accesso Libre, ambivalence in the responses of Angelenos to the characterization of their informational needs, but also in the putative hesitance of scholars in LIS to engage with – and critique – the vocabulary of neoliberalism. In these cases, ambivalence might be thought of as reasonable and purposive, as a way of refusing the coercive aspects of discourse.<sup>74</sup> Interrogating neoliberal theory (or theory of any variety, for that matter) can produce a robust analysis of a complex phenomenon, but this commitment should not be taken as a call to orthodoxy. While I resist a market moralism that fuels the responsibilization of those communities held in economic precarity, I also reject a priggish moralism that would require scholars to engage with terms and concepts that do not suit the work they have undertaken. In that spirit, I suggest that critiquing neoliberal terminology is not necessarily the only way to speak truth to power, but one among an endless variety of ways to speak truthfully *about* power.

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<sup>74</sup> Carole McGranahan, “Theorizing Refusal: An Introduction,” *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 3 (August 17, 2016): 319–25.

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