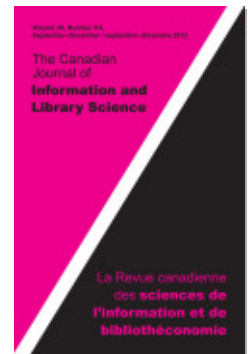Unpacking "Information Inequality": Toward a Critical Discourse of Global Justice in Library and Information Science / Pour exposer la question de « l'inégalité de l'information » : Vers un discours critique de la justice mondiale en sciences de l'information et bibliothéconomie

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Unpacking "Information Inequality": Toward a Critical Discourse of Global Justice in Library and Information Science

Pour exposer la question de « l'inégalité de l'information » : Vers un discours critique de la justice mondiale en sciences de l'information et bibliothéconomie

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Abstract: Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals frequently demonstrate interest in work toward a more just, equitable world. However, while information professionals constantly scrutinize the implications of language in everything from reference interviews to archival description, we seem far less inclined to such self-reflection in our interventions in global inequality, drawing uncritically on the language of traditional international development work, with all its attendant assumptions, limitations, and erasures of non-Western histories and knowledges. Mobilizing critical development theory, this paper elaborates a broad textual critique of the discourse of global "information inequality" within LIS and advocates a more critical discourse around global justice.

Keywords: information inequality, information professionals, global justice, critical development theory

Résumé : Les professionnels de la bibliothéconomie et des sciences de l'information font souvent preuve d'un intérêt marqué pour les efforts visant à amener un monde plus juste et plus équitable. Toutefois, si en tant que professionnels de l'information, nous sommes sans cesse en train de scruter les usages et les implications du langage utilisé dans tout ce que nous examinons, des entretiens de référence jusqu'à la description archivistique, nous sommes, semble-t-il, beaucoup moins enclins à l'autoréflexion critique dans nos interventions concernant les inégalités dans le monde; nous nous appuyons sans discernement sur la langue de travail du développement international traditionnel, avec toutes les hypothèses, limites et effacements qu'elle suppose dans les histoires et les connaissances non occidentales. En mettant à profit la théorie critique du développement, cet article élabore une large critique textuelle du discours sur « l'inégalité de l'information » sur le plan mondial tel qu'il est pratiqué au sein des sciences de l'information et préconise un discours plus critique sur la justice mondiale.

Mots-clés : Inégalité de l'information; professionnels de l'information; justice mondiale; théorie critique du développement

Many of us in the world of Library and Information Science (LIS) care about global justice, expressing active interest, as LIS professionals,[1] in struggles for a more just, equitable world. Examples of such interest abound, from the work of Librarians without Borders (http://lwb-online.org) to the words of Alex Byrne, past president of the International Federation of Library Associations, who, in his opening address to the 73rd World Library and Information Congress in 2007, emphasized the ongoing contribution of LIS professionals "to the development of our nations and of a fair and just world, a world in which we can progress towards an information society for all" (Byrne 2007, 260). Byrne goes on to propose that "the seeds of a just and fair future lie, at least in part, in libraries, in our important work" (260).

LIS challenges to global injustice have tended, however, to draw uncritically on the language of traditional international development work. While information professionals spend much time scrutinizing language in everything from cataloguing to archival description to reference interactions to usability testing, we seem far less inclined to critical self-reflection in our interventions in global inequality, paying little attention to the assumptions and limitations at play in our use of the language of "development" and to the histories erased and possibilities circumscribed. This paper advocates a (more) critical LIS approach to questions of global dispossession and struggles for justice, identifying and synthesizing a preliminary collection of relevant ideas, questions, and terms of reference. I establish a theoretical basis for such critique and advocacy by means of an overview of critical development studies, the scholarly tradition that has historically provided insight into the pitfalls and possibilities associated with well-intentioned Western challenges to global inequality. However, while extended, this overview is not meant to be exhaustive: Rather than detailing the diverse theoretical legacies and the expansive, intricate web of analysis generated in what is generally understood to be (at least) a half-century-old area of inquiry (see Parpart and Veltmeyer 2004), I will focus instead on outlining some of the questions and insights basic to the field, giving specific emphasis to the methodological and topical threads of particular relevance to the work of LIS professionals.

Drawing on the lines of questioning articulated by critical development studies writers, I proceed to a critical unpacking of the discourse of "information inequality" as a key conceptual constellation through which LIS communities have tended to articulate concern for global inequalities and desire for transformative intervention. It is worth emphasizing that the focus in this section is on textual critique: I explore the central questions at hand through a close reading of the representational landscape generated by LIS literature in this area—the contours of word choice, imagery, metaphor, narrative, and so on. While commonplace in humanities-based scholarship, such approaches are, to be sure, rare in LIS writing, a field that has tended to focus on questions of technical practice over those of representation and meaning. Nevertheless, this paper proceeds from the assumption that practices of interrogating patterns of meaning-making are worthwhile exercises and scholarly contributions in their own right, even if they are not directly connected to specific, concrete policy recommendations or

other pragmatic solutions: As our use of language, conscious or not, delimits that which we are able to understand as possible, a focus on critique of language contributes to conditions by which we, as a field, might expand such understanding in potentially productive (albeit not necessarily predictable) ways. This paper is presented as such a contribution, offering a preliminary research foundation from which to articulate the relevance of the basic critiques of critical development work to the particular project of understanding and addressing global injustice within an LIS context.

Majority world/minority world: A note about terminology

In place of more prevalent descriptors for locations of global power and dispossession—"developed" and "underdeveloped," "First World" and "Third World," and "Global North" and "Global South"—I have chosen to deploy Shahidul Alam's concept of the "majority world" (along with its terminological counterpart, "minority world") throughout this paper. While certainly less commonplace, the phrase has come to be accepted as a means of referring, in the words of its originator, to those "economically poor countries of the world" that have traditionally been categorized as being "'Third World' or 'Developing World' or even LDCs (Least Developed Countries). The expressions have strong negative connotations that reinforce the stereotypes about poor communities and represent them as icons of poverty. They hide their histories of oppression and continued exploitation . . . and hinder the appreciation of the cultural and social wealth of these communities (Alam 2008, 89).

It is worth emphasizing that "minority" and "majority" here do not align with their usage in Western parlance around racialized demographics (as in the phrase "ethnic minorities," for instance). Rather, the terms underscore the disjuncture between power and population at a global scale. The phrase was coined, in Alam's words, as a way of pointing to "the fact that we are indeed the majority of humankind. It also brings sharp attention to the anomaly that the Group of 8 countries—whose decisions affect the majority of the world's people—represent a tiny fraction of humankind. . . . It also defines the community in terms of what it has, rather than what it lacks" (89). It seems to me that these terms are not only most accurate as referents, but also embody a critique of the language of "development" by which the present paper is driven.

Critical development studies: An overview

Harry Truman's address of January 20, 1949, is widely recognized to have inaugurated not only his presidency of the United States but also the formal era of "development," emphatically introducing the term into mainstream public discourse as a banner under which the minority world could conceive of its majority-world interventions in humanitarian terms, as constructive aid aimed at ending poverty, hunger, and disease (Esteva 1991, 7):

> We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions

approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people. . . . The old imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit—has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing. (Truman 1949, par. 47–47, 54)

Constructed, thus, as a paradigmatic shift from violent, profit-driven control and mistreatment to sincere, empathetic benevolence, the narrative of development was widely seen as promising. Rahnema (1997) observes that as official colonialism was beginning to fall apart, "development" presented itself as a conceptual framework through which leaders of colonial independence movements could establish stable "modern" societies, through which "formerly" colonized peoples could achieve freedom from the dispossession against which they had struggled, and by which the West could continue to derive economic and other strategic benefit from relationships with the majority world.

Despite the ongoing material failures of the development project to do anything but worsen the systemic exploitation, violence, and dispossession it promised to end in the majority world (Escobar 1995; Rahnema 1997; Shiva 2005), the concept of development nevertheless came to achieve "the status of a certainty in the [Western] social imaginary" (Escobar 1995, 5). Vigorously elaborated through an apparatus extending from the highest reaches of corporate and governmental power in the West through bureaucracies, policy makers, majority-world governments, educational programs, NGOs, and well-meaning front-line aid workers (Crush 1995), development came to be entrenched in its representation as an unquestionably positive undertaking (Crush 1995; Rahnema, 1997; Tucker 1999).

It is this mythological status that critical development studies (CDS) has sought to disrupt.[2] CDS appeals, fundamentally, to those who are genuinely invested in the purported global justice goals of the development project: It presents methods, histories, and other insights through which such folks might reflect critically upon the historical legacies within which the work they undertake (or support) takes place, the interests and inequalities served by the development system upon which such work is based, and the assumptions upon which it draws and works to recirculate. Our best intentions are ultimately not worth much, CDS suggests, if they are not *informed*—that is, founded on a commitment to critical self-awareness and shaped by genuine understanding of those voices, approaches, and knowledges that have traditionally been marginalized in the development project.

One of the central tasks undertaken by CDS scholars, then, has been the denaturalization of the language of "development," the exposure of its contexts and constructedness (Crush 1995; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Sardar 1999). However, the aim here is not merely to reveal the tenuousness of the development project's semantic terrain: CDS scholars seek, rather, to bring into relief the fundamental power relations embedded within development—that is, the

interests it serves, the voices it silences, and the (mis)representations it circulates (Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1997). In particular, these critics draw attention to the forceful creation of "underdevelopment": The development project deploys peculiarly Western economic measures and cultural logics as yardsticks for "progress," and, intentionally or not, it treats any majority world departure from (or outright rejection of) this teleology—whether the departure be a particular rejection of integration into a market economy or a predominantly oral community's "illiteracy"—as a sign of inherent civilizational "backwardness," poverty, ignorance, and the like (while at the same time ignoring the West's pivotal role in the creation of majority world dispossession) (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Escobar 1995; Esteva 1991; Ferguson 1997; Munck 1999; Rahnema 1997; Sardar 1999; Shiva 2003, 2005; Tucker 1999).

The creation, in this way, of "problems" of "underdevelopment"—that is, the presumption of Western cultural logics and measures of progress as universal and unquestionable—positions the majority world as a market for minority-world "solutions" (Escobar 1995). Whether such solutions involve the sale of genetically modified seeds to majority-world farmers with the promise of increased yields and monetary wealth (Shiva 2003), or the forcible liberalization of global trade so as to bring "industry" to majority world communities, the creation of "underdevelopment," then, chiefly serves the interests of those minority-world actors (corporations and governments alike) whose future livelihoods depend on the extension, rather than alleviation, of majority-world dispossession (Escobar 1995). In this way, the development project has simply served as a new cloak of benevolence under which to extend the resource extraction, labour exploitation, and "emerging market" creation undertaken during formal imperial eras (Escobar 1995; Goldsmith 1997; Shiva 2003, 2005; Veltmeyer 2005).

Further, CDS scholars emphasize, the development project has not simply drawn on narratives of majority-world inferiority, but has also served as a powerful vehicle for the legitimization and forceful recirculation of what Escobar (1995) calls an "underdeveloped subjectivity" within public discourse:

> There exists a veritable underdeveloped subjectivity endowed with features such as powerlessness, passivity, poverty, and ignorance, usually dark and lacking in historical agency, as if waiting for the (white) Western hand to help subjects along and not infrequently hungry, illiterate, needy, and oppressed by its own stubbornness, lack of initiative, and traditions. (8; see also Esteva 1991)

The naturalized conceptual framework of the development project—"progress," "education," "tradition," and so on (including "development" itself)—thus enables the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing inferiorization and exploitation of the very communities it purports to benefit: Instead of making efforts to understand the specifics of the emergence of majority world dispossession, proponents of development presume it to originate in such communities' inexplicable civilizational "backwardness."

CDS scholars' calls for the critical examination of the development project and attendant recognition of the histories, interests, assumptions of cultural

inferiority, and material failures that its naturalized language obscures, however, are not tantamount to a proposal that suffering in majority-world communities is overstated or a figment of the West's imagination, nor are they necessarily a suggestion of the futility of minority-world contributions to ending such global injustice. On the contrary, CDS critiques appeal, as suggested, to a general desire to address such injustice fully. They emphasize that the conceptual frameworks of "development," as the status quo vehicle available for making sense of efforts to end global suffering, are indeed profoundly limiting where our understanding of the extent and dynamics *of*, as well as the range of possible solutions *to*, such injustice is concerned.

Escobar's (1995) conceptualization of development as a discourse offers a useful tool in this respect. Escobar acknowledges that the material realities of suffering and exploitation in the majority world do demand urgent responses, but suggests that development fails to represent both the true nature of the problem and effective solutions:

> [T]here is a situation of economic exploitation that must be recognized and dealt with. . . . There is also a certain materiality of life conditions that is extremely preoccupying and that requires great effort and attention. But those seeking to understand the Third World through development have long lost sight of this materiality by building upon it a reality that like a castle in the air has haunted us for decades. Understanding the history of the investment of the Third World by Western forms of knowledge and power is a way to shift the ground somewhat so that we can start to look at that materiality with different eyes and in different categories. (53)

For Escobar, as for other CDS scholars, understanding the workings of knowledge and power in development as a discourse consists of unpacking not merely the accuracy of the language used, but the particular ways in which such language shapes the bodies, communities, and practices of which it speaks, and the specific historical and contemporary dynamics of power by which such language is shaped and to whose shape it further contributes (10). The narrative of development and its attendant interrelated lexicon of "poverty," "underdevelopment," "progress," "tradition," and so forth thus

> [set] the rules of the game: who can speak, from what points of view, with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise; it sets the rules that must be followed for this or that problem, theory, or object to emerge and be named, analyzed, and eventually transformed into a policy or a plan. (40–41)

To recognize the workings of development as a discourse, in other words, is to understand that its entire system of representing *global dispossession* and its omission of particular voices powerfully (if also precariously) circumscribes the very frameworks available to us for thinking, speaking, and practicing our concern: It "produces permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying others and even making others impossible" (5). The act of denaturalizing the narrative of "development," Escobar suggests, is therefore about disrupting such constraints on critical self-awareness and, in turn, opening up the possibility of a

broader range of responses: "The goal of the analysis is to contribute to the liberation of the discursive field so that the task of imagining alternatives can be commenced (or perceived by researchers in a new light) in those spaces where the production of scholarly and expert knowledge for development purposes continues to take place" (14).

While these few words do not capture the full extent of Escobar's project (nor all the nuances and implications of his Foucauldian methodology), his central suggestion, as outlined above, is worth highlighting: Critical examination of the dynamics of the conceptual frameworks available to us for engaging global dispossession is a profoundly *enabling* practice, as it allows us to understand problems more fully, to recognize the ramifications of available responses, and, most significantly, to expand the range of conceivable solutions—to think, quite literally, the unthinkable (see also Crush 1995; Esteva 1991; Ferguson 1997; Sardar 1999; Shiva 2003; Tucker 1999).

There are two concepts related to the discursive constellation of development whose analysis as such within CDS is of particular relevance to LIS here: "technology" and "information/knowledge." It is to a brief overview of such analyses that I now turn.

Technology

The concept of technology, CDS critics observe, is central to the narrative of development. As Truman's reference to advances in science and industrialization in the passage cited above may suggest, the emergence of the development project coincided with the post–World War II intensification of minority-world faith in the promise of technology, which has since become the chief concern of development (Crewe and Harrison 1998, 34; see also Escobar 1995; Sardar 1999; Ullrich 1991). The presence of the West's machines came to be seen—as it had been seen in the 19th century (Escobar 1995, 23)—as a sign of inherent civilizational superiority, while the absence thereof in majority-world communities was taken as a sign of underdevelopment (Shiva 2005; Sardar 1999; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Ullrich 1991). Even as the continual failure of Western technology to end majority-world suffering was blamed on indigenous peoples' purportedly inherent ignorance or their perceived stubborn "clinging" to "tradition" and "culture" (Crewe and Harrison 1998, 44; see also Tucker 1999), the application of such technology[3] came to be seen as the culturally neutral linchpin of universal solutions to the problems facing such communities, their one hope for achieving "progress," "civilization," and "development" (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Sardar 1999; Ullrich 1991). The concept of technology—like development itself—has come to be treated as unquestionable as a mode of minority-world intervention in majority-world suffering, having "installed itself so firmly in most people's minds," to use Ullrich's (1991) words, "that, even today, a critique of it is more likely to be regarded as incorrigible heresy than as a voice warning of a false path" (276).

It is precisely this mythological status accorded to technology that CDS scholars seek to challenge. But where the project at hand is concerned, such

challenges are most useful where they provide means of questioning the very definition of technology in development discourse to begin with. Arnold's (2005) critical history of technology and twentieth-century European colonialism, for example, challenges the narrative by which technology has been framed as a marker of Western expertise and civilizational advancement, as a phenomenon whose sole incarnation in majority-world communities is as an exported "boon bestowed by technologically advanced civilizations on societies considered 'backward,' even 'primitive'" (87). In the history of Europe, technology, and colonialism, he argues, we see complex negotiations, cultural exchange, and contestation: Instead of externally developed machines and solutions being simply imposed on a population, there occurred (1) the creation and refinement of technologies now considered inherently European that involved raw material, labour, and systems and practices drawn from non-European societies; (2) "innovation" tied to the conditions forcibly shaped within the colonies; and (3) negotiation and adaptation on the part of indigenous peoples (see also Shiva 2003).

These sorts of histories oblige those of us in LIS whose minority-world professional context of engaging global justice is pervaded by narratives of technology to pause and reconsider our assumption of what constitutes technology in the first place and what traditions and solutions we ignore—and, indeed, dishonour—in the course of practices founded on and fueled by such tacit assumptions. It is indeed not only that the centrality of technology in development discourse has glamourized Western models of industrialization to the detriment—and dispossession—of the majority world; the very singular location of technology as a concept also fuels status quo presumptions about "underdevelopment" itself, as the failure to know the majority world as a space of innovation, efficiency, and productivity (in ways, I might add, that disrupt the modernist inflections of these terms) reinforces the narrative of Western civilizational superiority. Such mythologies amount, again, to the discursive circumscription of possibilities where understandings and responses to matters of global injustice are concerned.

Information/knowledge

CDS writers have offered similar critiques of the mythology of "knowledge" as it is deployed within development narratives. They observe that, despite its claims of trans-cultural solutions, the development project both draws on and recirculates knowledges that are anything but universal. Ferguson (1997) and Shiva (2003) both observe that "development" definitions of poverty and productivity, for example, are founded on culturally and historically peculiar knowledges; they draw on a singularly market-based conception of what it means to be poor and what it means to be productive. The mobilization of such culturally limited knowledges as universals, in other words, creates discursive conditions in which the existence of indigenous knowledge as a valid category is inconceivable. The presumption, then, is that majority-world communities simply lack knowledge and that the answer to their dispossession in turn involves the import of knowledge from the West. Crewe and Harrison (1998) summarize this attitude with

reference to the words of economist and leading development technology theorist Fritz Schumacher: "His solution was to give knowledge: 'the gift of knowledge makes them free'. . . . Underlying the two components—first, 'we' have knowledge to give and, second, knowledge makes people free—is an implicit assumption that 'they' are ignorant" (33).

CDS scholars have powerfully argued for the recognition of the profound limitations that such singular definitions of knowledge place on struggles against global dispossession. Visvanathan's (2001) concept of "cognitive justice" captures both the claims and constructive application of such an argument. Within a broader critique of Manuel Castells's theorization of the "network society," Visvanathan argues that the claim that the current moment in Western civilization is somehow characterized by a peculiar abundance of information—the claim, that is, of a geographically and culturally circumscribed "information society"—is not only questionable but also deeply exclusionary. Citing biologist Wes Jackson's (1987) deconstruction of "information explosion" myths, he emphasizes the fact that the move toward this contemporary Western moment has been marked as much by loss of information as by its gain, particularly when one considers those irretrievable losses associated with the erosion of biodiversity and human movement away from rural lifestyles and their attendant invaluable knowledge systems.[4] Likewise, Visvanathan observes, African farming

> might embody different notions of community and science. It is this community of expertise that the official application of development might have destroyed. Within such a framework, African agriculture and systems of healing might be alternative paradigms, elusive and elliptical to current models of science. Viewed in this way, the [majority world] becomes not a void . . . but an alternative list of diversities, possibilities, epistemologies. (par. 16)

"To define knowledge as formal, abstractable knowledge," he argues, is thus "to impoverish knowledge and to deny the existence of tacit, embodied and alternative knowledges" (par. 21).

While dominant understandings of knowledge have "no place for defeated knowledges or alternative theories of knowledge," cognitive justice turns on the recognition that knowledge consists of more than "bits/bytes which can be appropriated, transferred, patented" (Visvanathan 2001, par. 29). "All living cultures are Silicon Valleys of information in their own right," he argues. Cognitive justice, in short, is "the right of many forms of knowledge to exist because all knowledges are seen as partial and complementary and because they contain incommensurable in-sights" (2001, par. 29; see also Sardar 1999).

Such cognitive-justice critiques and the similar recognition of the silencing power of extant notions of technology within the development project are particularly germane to thinking about global concern within communities in which "information" and "technology" occupy pivotal conceptual roles, such as LIS. But the larger lessons of CDS regarding thinking critically about the historical and contemporary assumptions, omissions, and representations associated with development are equally useful. They offer a broad framework for considering

the ways in which such critical self-scrutiny might indeed enable a more effective LIS discourse on global justice. It is to a brief glance at existing LIS materials relevant to such a discussion that I now turn.

Library and information science contexts

Unpacking the discourse of "information inequality"

There appears to be no shortage of desire within the library world for transformative intervention and, beyond this, no shortage of desire for interventions at a global scale. One of the central ways in which such global concern within LIS in recent years has been articulated has been through confrontations of "information inequality," with particular reference to the global "digital divide" and the means by which information and communications technology (ICT) might aid in efforts to address global suffering. As Yu (2006) demonstrates, scholarship on the topic of information inequality is extensive, showing particular intensification over the past decade or so. By the mid-1970s alone, over 700 documents had been published on the subject of information-related inequality (Childers 1975, cited in Yu 2006, 229), and by the turn of the millennium, the new topic of the digital divide had generated over 14,000 publications (Arquette 2002, cited in Yu 2006, 230).

Where such LIS writing has focused on information inequality on an international scale, "information" has tended to be located conceptually as central to the alleviation of majority world suffering. Kargbo (2002), for example, argues that "information is . . . an invaluable catalyst in national development. Like poverty, illiteracy and over population, the absence of reliable information is an epitome of underdevelopment" (97; see also Chan and Costa 2005; Witten et al. 2002; Cawkell 2001; and Aguolu 1997). Elsewhere, such statements integrate a conflation of access to information with access to technology. Aqili and Moghaddam (2008), for instance, identify the bridging of the digital divide as the key to resolving material global inequalities through information:

> Information and communications technology (ICT) can be considered as an important weapon in the war against world challenges. When used effectively, it offers huge potential to empower people in developing countries and disadvantaged communities to overcome obstacles, address the most important social problems they face, strengthen communities, democratic institutions, a free press, and local economies and maybe above all, *facilitate information flow with which [a] real information society can come true.* But, a digital divide separates those who can access and use ICT to gain these benefits, and those who either do not have access to such technology or who are unable to use it for one reason or another. (226–27, my emphasis)

The bridging of the digital divide through information technology, then, will be the sign that "real" information has started to "flow" in society (see also Kargbo 2002).

But my concern with such elisions within the literature is not so much a lack of analytical coherence due to the absence of consistent definitional distinctions between concepts of "information" and "technology," or, indeed, "information"

and "knowledge." What is troubling, rather, is that the vague—that is, taken-for-granted—language of information inequality serves as a vehicle (as LIS scholars Haider and Bawden [2006] also note) through which the fraught narrative of development and its attendant (albeit unwitting) erasures of colonial legacies and majority-world agency are enacted within an LIS context. It is difficult to argue with the broad claim that information is a necessary component of global justice work: Clearly, we need to share knowledges and understand one another if we are to seriously challenge the dispossession of the majority world. But, in keeping with the dynamics highlighted by CDS scholars and summarized above, the narrative of information inequality that emerges within LIS literature is that information is a quantifiable product (1) generated in abundance through the technological advancements of the West's information "revolution"; and (2) largely (if not completely) absent in the majority world—an absence that, in turn, accounts for such communities' "underdevelopment."

Aguolu (1997), for instance, offers direct expression of such assumptions, presenting an explicit narrative of linear "development" and "modernization" through "information" as measured against the "success" of minority-world communities:

> The developed countries of the world such as the USA, the UK, Germany and France use information as a basic resource which supplements the familiar natural resources of matter and energy and they spend a large portion of their resources on information systems. The developing countries, like those of Africa, the Caribbean and Australasia, on the other hand, lag behind in modern information generation, dissemination and utilization. The old practices, customs, and slow and laborious technologies still prevail. They have also remained largely underdeveloped, under-industrialized and poor. (26)

The majority world has remained "behind," in other words, because it does not prioritize "information," as incarnated in Western IT systems, over its primitive ("slow" and "old") "traditions." "For ['developing'] countries," Aguolo concludes, "the 'information age' may continue to be a mirage unless they are able to break the vicious circle of underdevelopment, obtain access to the world's store of knowledge available in various media, and use knowledge to effect speedy development" (29). The solution to the dispossession of the majority world, in short, is to import the information and technology of the West.

To be sure, some scholars acknowledge the majority world as a producer of knowledge worthy of sharing. Chan and Costa (2005), for instance, argue that if we are concerned about knowledge as a tool for ending suffering, we must move beyond one-way "knowledge flows," focusing our efforts squarely on building local capacity within majority-world communities that would allow "long term sustainable *local and international* knowledge" to be shared (148, my emphasis). However, in Chan and Costa's account, such majority-world knowledge becomes valid only when encompassed by Western academic institutional practices and information technologies, to the degree that production of knowledge in general is conceptually reduced to the production of published scientific research:

> The research infrastructure and the capacity to absorb scientific and technical knowledge are also weak in developing countries, leading to low levels of scientific output and

further under-development. *New knowledge is largely created in richer countries.* . . . Researchers in eight countries . . . produce almost 85 per cent of *the world's most cited publications*, while another 163 countries, mostly developing countries, account for less than 2.5 per cent. (142, my emphasis)

According to this logic, majority-world knowledge becomes conceivable as a contribution to the global dialogue only when it conforms to Western institutional models and circulates within Western knowledge dissemination systems. Indeed, Chan and Costa all but admit as much in their simultaneous—yet unexplained—acknowledgement and dismissal of indigenous knowledge: "Given the scope of this paper, other forms of 'local' or 'indigenous' knowledge that are often highly important for developing countries . . . will not be considered" (143). When it comes to discussing the "global knowledge commons" as a space for addressing the problem of global suffering, indigenous knowledges outside of Western institutional and technological systems seem to be barely worth mentioning.

Witten et al. (2002) demonstrate a similar logic in their account of ICT-driven solutions, specifically digital libraries, as a promising aid in the struggle to end suffering in the majority world. Notably, the authors suggest that digital libraries can serve as a vehicle toward such change in ways that don't necessarily exclude local/indigenous content. Digital libraries can, they argue, serve as a means of promoting indigenous culture, offering a more efficient and effective replacement for museums and traditional libraries:

Libraries and their close relatives, museums, have always been involved in preserving culture. These institutions collect literature and artifacts, and use them to disseminate knowledge and understanding of different times and cultures. Digital libraries, however, open up the possibility of far more flexible and coherent multimedia collections that are both fully searchable and browsable in multiple dimensions, and permit more active participation by indigenous people in preserving and disseminating their own culture. The principal participants are, by definition, the indigenous people themselves: *the developed world assumes the role of catalyst, midwife and consumer, for once indigenous culture has been recorded it will find a fascinated, sympathetic and, perhaps, influential audience in the developed world.* (8, my emphasis)

At work here is a familiar colonial narrative of what we might call "museumization": In what is ironically the article's only extended gesture toward indigenous agency, indigenous culture is characterized as a static phenomenon from another era, a "thing of the past" whose contemporary embodiment takes the form of a series of quantifiable, collectable materials validated only in their celebratory "preservation" *by* Western agents ("midwives") *through* Western institutional and technological processes and formations (museums, libraries, and digital technologies) *for* Western consumption. This construction of indigenous culture as archaic object of gaze (rather than subject of contemporary agency) is juxtaposed within the article against the dynamic, ever-progressing technology and knowledge of the "developed" world, a world full of rapid change (9) and "revolutions" (7). While there is a role for indigenous communities in the process of closing

the "knowledge gap" outlined by Witten et al., then, it does not appear to be that of producers of contemporary knowledges and knowledge dissemination systems. It is again no wonder that the authors thus arrive at the conclusion that the majority world is "knowledge poor" since the discursive terrain they outline offers little room to conceive of knowledges as presented and circulated in anything but Western institutional and epistemological frameworks.

Even where discussions within the LIS discourse on "information inequality" do not directly locate the minority world as sole producer of knowledge/information and Western ICT as the sole answer to the problem of global inequality, the development presumptions of Western epistemological superiority tend to remain: Where information access is seen to be a hindrance to alleviating majority-world suffering, uncritical deployments of phrases like "information poverty" and the "knowledge gap" abound, alongside propositions of ICT-driven solutions. Acknowledgements—let alone serious discussions—of indigenous knowledges as dynamic and contemporary, of indigenous technologies, and of non-Western modes of disseminating culture and knowledge appear to be virtually absent from the literature. In the end, however, the familiar narratives of the majority world's dispossession as both a function and expression of its "backwardness" that mark the literature are as much a product of what is not said as they are of direct expressions. As genuinely concerned as such LIS writers seem to be about global suffering, there appears to be little effort to consider, even briefly, the historical circumstances surrounding the dispossession of the majority world. In those rare moments where "indigenous knowledge" is recognized as existing, it is given little legitimacy other than in passing references as a phenomenon to be enhanced by association with Western technology. Within LIS's discourse of information inequality, then, the use of phrases like "information technology," "information systems," and "technological advancement" as references to the traditions of indigenous majority-world communities appears inconceivable.

Toward a critical LIS discourse on global justice

There seems to be little within the extensive LIS discussions around information and global inequality, then, that integrates critical self-analysis of the sort that CDS scholars suggest is crucial to understanding the details of, and articulating effective alternative responses to, global dispossession. To be sure, a handful of LIS writings appear to present initial contributions toward the development of a body of such critique. Pyati (2005), for instance, offers a detailed analysis of official (and putatively inclusive) international documents produced by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS); he systematically critiques the concept of the "information society" (and attendant concepts of "information," "knowledge," and the "digital divide") within these texts, highlighting their ambiguity and presumed self-evidence, and pointing to a technological determinism that effectively hampers truly inclusive debate rather than enabling it. Likewise, Hyder (2005) offers a critique of the measures by which the information society has come to be formulated in international policy circles, noting

(indeed in line with the above-cited observations of CDS scholars) that capitalist productivity-oriented definitions of information and its effect on development are geared toward integrating the majority world into the global trading system dominated by the West. Similarly, Luyt (2004) examines the increased prominence of ICT as a development solution on international policy agendas, inquiring into which actors benefit most from such agendas. Detailing specific global shifts in capital investment and labour markets, as well as the development project's material failures as a means of addressing dispossession, Luyt observes that the positioning of the digital divide as a key development concern has chiefly served the economic interests of multinational information corporations, the political interests of elites in nations identified as "developing," and the institutional interests of the development industry and other civil society groups. Potter (2006) offers a critique of both representation and political economy within global-facing LIS work, focusing specifically on chauvinistic assumptions in discourses of the "digital divide" and setting out to theorize an alternative framework for such well-meaning work.[5]

Perhaps most useful as a starting point for further inquiry in this area, however, is Haider and Bawden's (2006; 2007) discourse analysis of the concept of "information poverty" in LIS professional and scholarly literature. Haider and Bawden dissect the construction of the "information poor" and "information rich" within LIS literature, focusing on representational practices in LIS in a manner similar to that offered within this paper's preceding pages: They expose the precariousness of assumptions about where, to what degree, and in what form "information" exists, and point, notably, to the pervasiveness of the narrative of development (and its attendant presumptions about the legitimacy of majority-world communities) in such discussions (see especially 2006). In particular, they observe several "strongly interwoven themes" (2007, 543) in the literature: "economic determinism"—that is, the positive association of "information" with material wealth generation; "technological determinism"—the conflation of "information" with digital technologies; the identification of the "information poor" as a permanent feature of the library's traditional user community; and, concomitantly, the articulation of a sense of professional responsibility—an ethical obligation within librarianship to uplift the "information poor" from their "deficiency" (2007, 549). To be sure, Haider and Bawden's work in this area seems more focused on establishing, in intricate detail, the presence of this discursive landscape within LIS than it does on advocating an explicit politics of LIS global justice in response. Nevertheless, its detailed exposure of the pervasiveness of, and deconstruction of the assumptions underlying, the concept of "information poverty" nevertheless provide useful (and rare) validation of both the methods and the subject of critical analysis upon which elaborations would be based. Indeed, more recent work by Haider has extended such examination of development discourse in LIS, by focusing specific critique on development-oriented international information policy documents that draw on well-worn notions of (Western) science and progress as tacit foundational assumptions in (1) framing the Open Access movement (Haider

2007) and (2) conceptualizing "Indigenous Knowledge" (Lindh and Haider 2010).

Final thoughts

In light of the fact that the broader legacies of global dispossession that have shaped our world are characterized in part by a history of systemic erasure of majority-world knowledges and technologies, we information "specialists" would do well to take a cue from those few among our colleagues undertaking inquiries of this reality to question our presumption that the problem of majority-world suffering is simply a problem of lack of knowledge, information, communication, or technology. We would do well, further, to question the very forces—that is, the historical and contemporary cultural contexts—that have fundamentally shaped the conceptions of "information," "knowledge," "technology," and so on that occupy such central roles in our professional responses. We would do well, in sum, to seek a broad critical understanding of technology and information, rather than limiting our discussion by unwittingly reinforcing presumptions of civilizational superiority through narratives of Western "information societies"—that there are such things as "information poverty" in the majority world and (by implication) "information wealth" in the minority world.

These are admittedly broad recommendations. Although the elaboration of a substantive action plan focused on the specific front-line contexts of global-facing LIS work is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems to me that any undertaking in the directions outlined above must start, in concrete terms, with a rigorous practice of asking ourselves difficult questions about what we understand and believe. What, for example, are the historical origins of the global injustices to which we seek to offer LIS practices—such as the building of a library, the donation of "Books for Africa" (http://www.booksforafrica.org), or the construction of One Laptop per Child (http://one.laptop.org)—as solutions? Do we really believe, for instance, that the problem of global injustice is one of lack of access to technology? And are we comfortable with equating technology solely with ICT? Whose material interests are served by such equations? Are we prepared to support the suggestion, embedded in daily utterances of "information society," that majority-world dispossession is attributable to such communities somehow not having "enough" information? Likewise, are we really ready to stand behind the suggestion that recorded information—the document, central as it is to our profession—is a sign of inherent cultural superiority? If so, what (long-standing) assumptions about cultural inferiority follow in turn? What, indeed, might we discover by considering the history of stereotypes of cultural superiority, of imagery of civilization and barbarism? Does a given expression of concern and desire for intervention—or, more specifically, the language and assumptions upon which we draw in framing such concern and interventions—in global inequality in any way challenge these well-established stereotypes of dark continents and backwardness? Or does it simply entrench them further? What effect does the extension of these sorts of racist mythologies have both on our ability to engage in meaningful collaboration with a variety of

communities globally and on the capacity of the profession to provide an inclusive critical environment within which those of us librarians (and those among our users) who find ourselves racialized by similar historical narratives might find spaces to speak?

The practice of asking such questions requires a commitment within LIS to moving beyond our professional obsession with purely pragmatic approaches toward a recognition of the value of asking such questions without qualification or preconditions; to paraphrase a colleague, we cannot begin to collectively elaborate specific solutions until we develop a culture of asking deeper questions. The exploration of such questions, furthermore, ought not simply be limited to theoretical treatises in journals and monographs; to draw on Leckie and Buschman (2010), such approaches "need to be incorporated into the very essence of our professional practices. . . . A better understanding of critical-theoretical approaches would serve to sharpen the research lens when we examine problems relating to professional practice and real-world application" (xii). What would it mean to make a commitment, as a profession, to actively bringing these sorts of questions to the assumptions that are articulated, say, in meetings and hallway conversations involving practising librarians about "technological innovation"; in discussions, design, or celebration of well-intentioned digitization initiatives or international professional exchanges; or in the elaboration of library advocacy, our public articulation of the good that libraries do? Again, we cannot even begin to answer such questions in these contexts until we start to ask them.

The insights articulated in the space of critical development studies offer important and useful starting points for such problem-posing, pointing, as they do, not only to the precarious constructedness of languages of global concern but also the interests, histories, power relations, marginalizing representations, and sheer silences such naturalized languages obscure. Regrettably, LIS deployments of critical analysis of this sort appear to be exceptions to the rule of uncritical "information inequality" narratives which offer no room for imagining anything but the most singular forms of knowledge. But it is such exceptions—and the lines of inquiry outside of LIS to which they lead us—that we must take as our starting point, for it is only where we take exception—to injustice, but also to our taken-for-granteds in research and practice—that transformation becomes truly possible.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. "LIS professionals" and similar phrases throughout this paper are understood to refer to both scholars and practitioners.
2. The phrases "post-development studies" and "anthropology of development" have also been used to name the sorts of work described here. While the merits of each

term are certainly worth debating, I have chosen to use "critical development studies" because it seems the least stylistically awkward and the most encompassing and flexible (the work described here is all critical of the fundamentals of development even as it remains tied to development's purported aims).

3. The use of pesticides, for example (Shiva 2003).

4. McKibben (1992) offers a similar argument in relation to the loss of cultural and ecological information in the supposed "information age" marked by the advent of television.

5. Though Potter deploys the "developed"/"developing" world binary uncritically throughout her paper, even as she deconstructs some of the very logics of Western superiority and universality upon which this dualism is based. To a degree, then, she remains tied, in representational terms, to the selfsame unwitting endorsement of oppressively limited narratives of progress—towards *what* is the "developing" world "progressing" and on whose terms?—that she so genuinely asks us to question. Nevertheless, her contribution is useful in its detailed insistence on, and relatively rare validation of, efforts to forcefully question foundational assumptions about the concepts of "information" and the historical, economic, and geopolitical processes that shape and limit our best efforts at confronting global injustice as information professionals.

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