INFORMED SOCIETIES
WHY INFORMATION LITERACY MATTERS FOR CITIZENSHIP, PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY

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Introductory chapter – PREPRINT VERSION

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This book is for anyone who cares for informed participation in society. It is for any reader, anywhere in the world, who suspects or recognises that inclusive societies function best when its members have the means, capability and confidence to make the most out of the information that they encounter on a daily basis. In this sense, it deals with the capacity of human beings to achieve genuine autonomy. The book is for individuals who feel that engaged citizenship thrives on informed, evidence-based views of the world. It is for anyone interested in reinforcing, reinvigorating and deepening democracy in the face of the dangers represented by misinformation and attempts to deceive – whatever the nature and the source of the deception. But at the same time, the book is absolutely not intended as an arcane treatise for experts, and although it is written with academic rigour, it is accessible, engaging and deliberately provocative. And whilst recognising many worries, difficulties and obstacles, it is ultimately optimistic about the ways that a well-informed citizenry can underpin healthy, lively democratic systems. Such is the gist of informed societies.

So, in light of this, why information literacy, and how does it fit in?

It was in 1974 that Paul Zurkowsky first explicitly suggested the concept of information literacy (Zurkowsky, 1974). He framed this simply as the abilities to use information tools to mould information solutions that address the problems of individuals. Although this view was set out in the pre-internet age, forty-five years on, the inference remains valid: information literacy is a means of helping people to address their information needs, which are as varied as the life experiences and aspirations of individuals. This variety reflects many if not all aspects of people's lives: in education, in work, in leisure, in creativity, in wellbeing, in addressing financial and

material needs. And one further, crucial part of this variety is the relationship with an important aspect of human endeavour: people's ability to function and take part in society, to contribute to shaping its rules and conventions, to take advantage of the opportunities for participation that democracy entails and, just as significantly, to create new opportunities for engagement and participation.

The rationale for the book is therefore that information literacy is an important determinant for being an informed member of society, either as an individual or as part of a community. Moving on from Zurkowsky, more recent definitions of information literacy frame the concept as a human right that helps to promote social inclusion (UNESCO/NFIL/IFLA, 2005) and as a means of empowering citizens to develop informed views and to engage fully with society (CILIP, 2018). In a world saturated with readily-available information – online especially, but also in print and oral – an ability to make sense of it is vital in order to make sense more broadly about the world. Moreover, given that the quality, the reliability and the veracity of information varies hugely, information literacy is also about developing the capacity and confidence to make judgements about information, to adopt healthily critical approaches towards it, to understand its purpose, its provenance and the way that it is mediated. And on that basis, to challenge it and offer alternative narratives – on the understanding that these too are founded on rational, well-informed discourse. Encouraging and nurturing such a discerning approach to information has become particularly important, and urgent too, in the light of the dangers represented by online misinformation, disinformation, 'fake news', 'post-truth' and information behaviours that fall prey to political and commercial manipulation – these dangers are discussed throughout the book. As Lisa Janice Hinchliffe suggests in the preamble, the book thus has the added merit of being highly timely and topical.

However, in spite of its power as a concept, information literacy isn't widely recognised as a term outside the realms of the information professions and of information science. It is unusual for it to feature explicitly in public discourse – Barack Obama's Proclamation on information literacy, at the time when he was US President, is a relatively rare exception (The White House, 2009). More often, it is the closely related concepts of digital literacy (sometimes also presented as digital skills) and media literacy that attract attention and are better recognised by policymakers, politicians and civil society. In reality, however they are termed, these different literacies overlap considerably and to some extent are used indistinguishably. Thus for instance, the UK Parliament's Interim Report on disinformation (House of Commons, 2018) carried important recommendations aimed at promoting among the public a more discerning and critical approach to online information – but the report placed this under the heading of digital literacy rather than information literacy. In its own report on tackling disinformation, the European Commission recognises the importance of developing critical thinking and good personal practices for discourse online (European Commission, 2018), and places that under the joint heading of media and information literacy (MIL) – reflecting UNESCO's global approach that also frames the issue around MIL, as described in chapter 5 of this book. An earlier European Commission report placed the gathering, processing, understanding and critical evaluation of information in the context of digital competence (Ferrari, 2013).

We can therefore say that information literacy is subsumed into other literacies and competencies. It is implicit in public discourse, its essential characteristics are increasingly recognised. One of the purposes of this book is to highlight the societal importance of information literacy, to encourage its further recognition and give it its due place, by making

reference to it very explicitly as a vital factor in the functioning of a healthy, inclusive, participatory society.

It follows that the book is in essence political. Indeed, it deliberately seeks to situate information literacy in the political realm and to demonstrate the political implications of information literacy. If politics is defined as "the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live" (Hague and Harrop, 2013), then there is a correlation with the sort of empowerment suggested by the CILIP definition, outlined above. The premise of the book is based on this correlation: effective democratic participation in society – the act of politics in its broadest sense – is underpinned by people's ability to reach informed views; while the very essence of an a judicious and discerning information behaviour forms part of the process through which individuals and groups can behave politically.

In charting this correlation, the book follows a narrative that starts with an examination of political theory and principles, inasmuch as these relate to information literacy. This is covered by the first two chapters which look at concepts such as democratic theory, models of democracy, power and authority. The narrative then shifts to the interface between psychology, politics and information literacy, with two chapters delving into how information behaviour is affected respectively by intellectual empathy towards the beliefs of others, and by a propensity to believe misinformation. The following chapters move on to the more applied realm of the international and national policy environments (it being understood that relevant policies are largely the product of political will and circumstances), at the global level and in case studies in the northern and southern hemispheres. And the final chapters describe how information literacy, in very practical ways, can foster participation and engagement in four particular contexts: among young people, through the action of libraries, among vulnerable communities (as exemplified by refugees) and among older people. It should be no surprise that education – in schools, universities and elsewhere – runs as a thread throughout the narrative.

The book starts with an examination of political and democratic theory, and how this relates to discourses on the ability of individuals to evaluate online information, and to develop reflexivity about the digital environment in which information circulates. In chapter 1, Gianfranco Polizzi sets out the relationship between information literacy, media literacy, critical digital literacy and political literacy, and how this is important for democracy and for engagement in civic and political life – not least in the context of confronting misinformation (which is further addressed in some detail also in chapters 4 and 8). On that basis, he examines how different theoretical models of democracy define the way that citizens participate in democratic processes – and by extension, how an ability to evaluate information may contribute to such types of participation. The relevance of different models or traditions of democracy is picked up again, albeit from more particular perspectives, in chapter 7, which considers political philosophy and culture in South Africa; and in chapter 9, which relates democratic models to the approaches and practices of academic and public librarians.

Whereas chapter 1 adopts a macro approach, using the broad lens of the political-democratic framework, Andrew Whitworth's chapter 2 is focused on micro-politics, termed as the relations of power, authority and inequality that stem from everyday language and discourse. Here, the suggestion is that discerning approaches to information can enable individuals and communities to build on their own diverse perspectives, reflecting their identities and world-views, to make informed and meaningful political judgements and thereby to counter and challenge power, authority and prevailing hegemony. So information literacy may here be seen not just as an aid

to participation in society, but also as an enabler of personal and social emancipation. Later in the book, chapter 11 builds on this view in the particular context of older members of society.

In chapter 3, Andrea Baer develops the notion of belief and identity and sets out an approach to information literacy that stresses the significance of personal beliefs and social identity to information behaviour. In this view, information literacy is not just about achieving a perception of objectivity and neutrality regarding information: it encourages self-awareness and, on that basis, promotes critical engagement. And, crucially, it can help foster intellectual empathy, an ability to consider the viewpoints, experiences and reasoning of others and to appreciate how social identity and social difference may influence beliefs. This provides a more rounded and solid ground for democratic dialogue and civic engagement.

Further developing the psychological angle touched upon above, in chapter 4 Stephan Lewandowsky reflects on the political and psychological consequences of the 'post-truth' world (taken up also in chapter 9). The question here is what the cognitive sciences can contribute to addressing the highly topical and very political challenge of misinformation – an insidious problem that contributes to undermine the democratic process. There is much evidence to suggest that, once acquired, misinformation is difficult to debunk and dislodge from the minds of individuals. There are ways of countering this, and the chapter proposes that 'inoculating' or 'prebunking' people against misinformation, before it is presented, is an appropriate strategy. But such solutions are unlikely to be effective on their own, and a multisciplinary approach – notably including technological solutions – is needed to confront the scale of the challenge. And ultimately, this needs to be associated with political mobilization and public activism.

The next three chapters move beyond the sphere of theory, culture and human behaviour to examine the international and national public policy environments that bear on information literacy; the principles that underpin the relevant policies; and the practices that stem from such policies. In chapter 5, Jesús Lau and Alton Grizzle consider the evolution of media and information literacy (MIL), as defined by UNESCO – which, as the UN's cultural and educational agency, is the global body that has taken the lead in this area. UNESCO sees MIL as an enhancer of human rights, and the chapter charts the ways in which over the years the agency, and a variety of global initiatives associated with it, has refined and promoted the concept of MIL; and the ways in which, over time, the concepts of information literacy and media literacy have tended to converge.

Chapters 6 and 7 then look at information literacy policy through the prism of some national case studies. In chapter 6, John Crawford examines the broad challenges associated with scoping national information literacy activities, policies and strategies; he then describes how these challenges have been addressed through the contrasting experiences of three European countries/regions: Scotland, Wales and Francophone Belgium. The development of workable frameworks and the relationship between information literacy initiatives and other areas of public policy are notable features of these experiences, and the chapter concludes that information literacy activity and policy-making are a process – and often a somewhat drawn out one – and not a single, time-limited event. Chapter 7 provides a contrasting view, with Reggie Raju, Glynnis Johnson and Zanele Majebe arguing that information literacy provides the basis for lifelong learning and therefore plays a significant role in helping to nurture a fledgling democracy in the global south. The chapter draws from experiences in South Africa and places information literacy in the context of human rights (reflecting UNESCO's view); of the government's constitutional obligation to foster an inclusive, cohesive, equitable society; and of

the humanism encapsulated in South Africa – and, to an extent, in Africa more broadly – by the Ubuntu philosophy. Further context is provided by South African school education landscape, the respective roles played by school and public libraries and the difficulties associated with the introduction of a new school curriculum. And, as the chapter points out, there are particular and severe challenges in a country that suffers from low literacy rates and the iniquitous continuing legacy of Apartheid.

As suggested above, the final four chapters seek to demonstrate how information literacy can foster participation and engagement in four different contexts, each of which relates to particular communities. In chapter 8, Geoff Walton and his colleagues explore how young people aged 16 to 24, mostly in school and university undergraduate settings, make judgements about the information that they encounter. The chapter recognises the importance of young people being information-savvy, not only to enable them to take part in civic, democratic society, but also for the sake of their physical and mental well-being. It addresses the levels of trust towards information (and thereby touches on some of the questions around misinformation addressed in chapter 4); how young people make judgements about information; and, concretely, how they can be helped to develop a discerning approach to information.

In Chapter 9, Hilary Yerbury and Maureen Henninger pick on the important part that libraries and librarians have traditionally played in the provision of information to support democracy and democratic processes. But in a world where there is less concern with creating a consensus of knowledge, and where there is a shift from a regime of truth to one of 'post-truth', libraries – which tend to operate in institutional regimes of truth – face challenges in the way that they provide their offer, including their information literacy offer. The chapter explores how university libraries and public libraries serve their respective users in ways that are both similar and different, the differences being accounted for by the contrasting ways that each of these two sectors conceptualises democracy.

Chapter 10, by Konstantina Martzoukou, focuses on how the building of information capabilities contributes to support vulnerable communities. The chapter draws on work undertaken in Scotland with the integration of recently-arrived refugees from Syria – individuals and families scarred by conflict. It examines their information needs, their habitual and adaptive information literacy practices and the barriers and enablers they encountered within their new socio-cultural setting. Looking at the practical implications, the chapter examines the ways in which public libraries in particular help refugees gradually build capacity for active contribution to their new host society, thereby fostering civic participation and inclusion.

And finally, in chapter 11, Bill Johnston looks at how information literacy helps to create civic possibilities to meet the needs and issues of an ageing population. Older people have particular needs, stemming from their retirement from the workforce and related to the support structures that they draw upon in later life. But this dependency does not mean that seniors should play a passive role simply as recipients of services and retirement income – or even worse, that they should accept the prejudiced perception that they are a burden on society. They can and should counter ageist narratives by being civically engaged and active – and information literacy can play an important role in helping them to develop the sort of knowledge that is most appropriate for this stage in their lifecourse. Thus information literate ageing and civic participation go hand in hand.

The book's broad sweep should thus provide a rounded picture of the relevance of information literacy to citizenship, participation and democracy. It is hoped too that the different perspectives and frames that it covers will provoke reflection on why an information literate population is an important asset in contemporary society, across the globe. Of course, the book cannot address every single social, cultural or political circumstance in which information literacy might apply. But perhaps it will provide a basis for asking questions relating to other thematic and geographical areas, or about how the evidence base might be further developed.

Nurturing an informed society should not be regarded as a marginal issue, nor should it be treated as as an endeavour of secondary importance in national and international policy environments. Whether information literacy is recognised explicitly or implicitly, awareness of its vital contribution to society needs to continue growing. This book should help in that process.

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