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# **(Mis)information, information literacy, and democracy: Paths for pedagogy to foster informed citizenship**

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## **Abstract**

The current political climate is characterized by an alarming pattern of global democratic regression driven by authoritarian populist leaders who deploy vast misinformation campaigns. These offensives are successful when the majority of the population lack skills that would allow them to think critically about information in the political sphere, to identify misinformation, and therefore to fully exercise democratic citizenship. Political science has theorized the link between information and power and information professionals understand the cognitive decision-making process involved in processing information, but these two literatures rarely intersect. This paper interrogates the links between information literacy (IL) and the rise of authoritarian populism in order to advance the development of a new transtheoretical model that links political science (which studies power), information science, and critical pedagogy to suggest new paths for teaching and research. We call for a collaborative research and teaching agenda, grounded in a holistic understanding of information as power, that will contribute to achieving a more informed citizenship and promoting a more inclusive democracy.

## **Keywords**

Canada; critical pedagogy; information literacy; information science; political science

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## **1. Introduction**

The failure of the neoliberal economic project to deliver promised benefits to large segments of the population has produced a social and economic crisis in both developed countries and emerging economies (Altvater 2009; Cahill 2011; Jessop 2012; Klein 2015). The resulting anxiety provides fertile ground for the emergence of authoritarian populist movements that pit 'The People' (guided by a demagogic leader) against 'The Other' in a struggle to restore a mythical Golden Age (Laclau 2005; Rummens 2017). These movements and their leaders are characterized by xenophobia and a disdain for liberal democracy and its institutions. One of the factors behind their success is the deployment of vast misinformation campaigns that speak to the fears and resentment of segments of the population that feel they have been left behind (Bergmann 2018; Cope 2010; Engesser et al. 2017). Deception and manipulation in politics are nothing new, but in the age of social media, illiberal populists have powerful new tools to support their misinformation campaigns (Engesser et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2018).

These offensives are successful when large numbers of people lack skills that would allow them to think critically about information relating to politics, and to filter misinformation emanating from politicians they support. Political science has theorized the link between information and power (Dahl 1982; Schmitter & Karl 1991). Information and media theorists understand the relationship between the ability to process information and the cognitive decision-making

process required of citizens to fulfil their civic responsibilities (Behrens 1994; Pangrazio 2016; Polizzi 2020). Yet in practice, information literacy (IL) pedagogy has not gone far enough with respect to teaching the kinds of skills that citizens require in the current political climate, nor is such instruction as ubiquitous as it needs to be.

The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) (2015) defines IL as a 'set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning' (p. 8). This definition encompasses important skills but does not adequately address the intersection of information and power, or the role of information in sustaining democracy. IL encompasses many skills, and some are more prevalent in IL pedagogy than others, particularly those related to searching and retrieval, and evaluating information for specific purposes such as course assignments (Bowles-Terry & Donovan 2016). Much of this takes place in a classroom setting. But in the current political climate, characterized by an alarming pattern of democratic regression in both developing societies and established liberal democracies (Freedom House 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), certain types of competencies must be reinforced and extracted from the academic context: understanding power and the political structures it rests on, capacity to critically analyze the power-information intersection, aptitude at interpreting data and information on their own merits (and regardless of their source), and ability to identify and reject misinformation even when disseminated by an authority, agency or institution trusted by the receiver.

The relationship between social media, (mis)information, populism, and democratic decline has been explored and criticized by academics and journalists alike (Mihailidis and Viotty 2017; Tufekci 2017; Vaidhyanathan 2018). But relatively few authors have taken the next step to examine the role that IL and other critical literacies could play in reversing these trends. Traditional IL practices, and the literature that they are based on, do not adequately engage with theory that examines the broader link between information and democracy (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Reyes Matta 1981; Somavía 1981; Sullivan 2019), with critical pedagogy praxis (Foucault 1991, 1972; Freire 1970), and with political, civil, and other literacies (Kellner & Share 2007). Furthermore, with few exceptions, IL research and practice remain wedded to the educational sector, and in particular to universities, rather than being diffused throughout the democratic polity (Whitworth 2020).

In the context of democratic regression, increasing concentration of economic (and therefore political) power, and an abundance of tools through which powerful actors can disseminate unfiltered information, IL theory and practice must evolve. But this evolution must be guided by collaborative work between information professionals, political scientists, critical educators, and others who understand the relationship between information, power, and democracy. It must also extend beyond the ivory tower of academia into civil society. In this paper, we interrogate the links between (mis)information and the rise of authoritarian populism. One of the authors is a political scientist with expertise in democracy, while the other is an academic librarian with a background in critical IL. Our goal is to contribute to the development of a transtheoretical model (Armitage 2009) that links political science (which studies power), information science, and critical pedagogy to suggest new paths for teaching. We examine key theoretical constructs in these domains in order to identify missing links, arguing that both theory and teaching around politics and information must enter into a dialogue. We call for a collaborative research and pedagogical agenda, grounded in a holistic understanding of information as power and dispersed throughout the education system and beyond, that will contribute to achieving a *critical democratic citizenship* for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. Democratic decline, authoritarian populism, and social media

In 1992, American political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed the 'end of history', arguing that the resolution of the Cold War would bring about the universalization of 'liberal democracy as the final form of human government.' (Fukuyama 1992, p. ix). While not all observers shared his optimism, the trends witnessed over the following decade appeared to confirm that more and more countries were adopting democratic regimes. In the 2010s, however, political scientists turned their attention to democratic backsliding (Kaufman & Haggard 2019; Lührmann & Lindberg 2019; Mechkova, Lührmann, & Lindberg 2017). In its annual ranking of countries based on 60 distinct democratic values (including freedom to information), the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) downgraded the United States from 'full democracy' to the growing 'flawed democracy' category (EIU 2018). But the U.S. is not the only country to experience this shift. Freedom House, one of the world's most prominent pro-democracy NGOs, stated that in 2018, the world 'recorded the 13th consecutive year of decline in global freedom'. The organization's annual report declares that 'democracy is in retreat' (Freedom House 2019).

There is a commonality that unites many of the countries that experienced democratic regression in the 2010s: the rise of authoritarian populist leaders. Populism is a political approach that claims to support 'ordinary' people in its struggle with a privileged 'elite' (Rummens 2017) yet is frequently characterized as a threat to liberal democracy. Populist leaders offer simplistic solutions to complex problems, seek to bypass liberal political institutions, and identify common enemies (Canovan 2005; Kazin 1998; Taggart 2000). They seek to impose an alternative regime of truth, one that serves their interests and excludes those of their opponents (de la Torre 2010; Germani 1965; Müller 2017). This 'truth', presented as liberating, generally identifies an 'Other' that must be excluded and eliminated (de la Torre 2010; Hawkins 2010; Knight 1998).

Populism is not associated with a particular ideology, but the form we are confronting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is closely associated with the far-right of the political spectrum and is characterized by authoritarianism, xenophobic nationalism, and a disdain for liberal democracy (Jay et al. 2019; Müller 2016; Traverso, Meyran, and Broder, 2019). Far-right populists have come to power in countries as diverse as India (Narendra Modi), Turkey (Recep Erdoğan), Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), Hungary (Viktor Orbán), and the United States (Donald Trump). They have made significant gains in many more countries, including established democracies such as France (Marine Le Pen), Italy (Matteo Salvini) and the Netherlands (Geert Wilders). Populist discourse and tactics were used extensively by the right-wing forces that successfully championed Brexit (Calhoun 2017; Inglehart & Norris 2016). All of the countries where far-right populists have come to power have suffered a decline in democratic practices and have experienced sustained attacks on democratic norms, including information pluralism (Freedom House 2019, EIU 2018).

At the core of populist strategy is misinformation (Cope, 2010; Mihailidis and Viotty 2017). Scholars make an important distinction between citizens who are uninformed (those who lack information) and misinformed (those who confidently hold and defend inaccurate factual beliefs) (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Populists deliberately seek to misinform as a strategy in pursuit of power (Lewandowsky 2020). Astute scholars observe that misinformation campaigns do not necessarily seek to convince people of the veracity of their claims. The real intention is to erode trust in reality itself and to exhaust people so that they simply withdraw from the political realm entirely and leave decisions in the hands of leaders, thus solidifying their power (Lewandowsky and Oberauer 2016; Tufekci 2017).

As Gerbaudo (2018) points out, there is a particular affinity between populism and social media, because these technologies provide a channel through which populist leaders can interact directly with supporters without having their messages filtered (or fact-checked) by third-party actors. In this way, social media provide populists with unrestricted 'freedom to articulate their ideology and spread their messages' (Engesser et al. 2017, p. 1110). These platforms support the massive diffusion of unverified rumours, conspiracy theories, and false news (Agnew and Shin, 2020; Del Vicario et al. 2016; Mintz et al. 2012; Tufekci 2017). The dangers of misinformation in any form cannot be understated, particularly since so many people are unable to effectively recognize what is true and what is not. MIT cognitive scientist David Rand has found that, 'on average, people are inclined to believe false news at least 20% of the time' (cited in Steinmetz, 2018). A 2016 poll by the Pew Research Center found that almost 25% of Americans had shared a made-up news story with others (Anspach & Carlson 2020, p. 699). Scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that false information on Twitter is shared 70% more often than accurate information (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral 2018, p. 1146). While social media allow people to respond and critique information in a way that traditional media do not, their interactive nature frequently leads partisan individuals to reproduce factually misleading information (Anspach & Carlson 2020).

Earlier in the Internet age, some observers hoped that these tools would serve to democratize information. Manuel Castells (1996, 2009, 2012), one of the most prolific authors on the topic, argues that the Internet has the potential to shift the control over information from the state and economic elites to the masses. But Tufekci (2017) argues that anti-democratic populists are weaponizing social media as part of their arsenal. She demonstrates that the deliberate production of overwhelming amounts of false information to create confusion and distraction is 'the new censorship'. Not surprisingly, research demonstrates that authoritarian populists and their supporters have made extensive use of social media, integrating these platforms into both election campaigns and governance practices (Bergmann 2018; Brady et al. 2017; Engesser et al. 2017; Groshek & Koc-Michalska 2017). Social media has been used by leaders such as Modi, Bolsonaro, and Trump to win elections by spreading misinformation and defaming opponents, to bypass criticism of mainstream media by delivering false information directly to supporters, and to threaten, intimidate, or humiliate opponents (Araújo & Prior 2020; Gaufman 2018; Hunter & Power 2019; Ott 2017; Pal, Chandra & Vydiswaran 2016; Sinha 2017; Tufekci 2018).

The 2020 U.S. election and its immediate aftermath should resolve any doubts about the threat posed to democracy when large segments of the public lack certain IL skills, in particular the ability to distinguish between evidence-based information and misinformation disseminated over social media for political purposes. The election also confirms the dangers of social media in the hands of authoritarian populists. A survey conducted a month after the election suggests that 17% of Americans and nearly 40% of Republican voters believed that Donald Trump had won the election, while 38% of Americans believed that large-scale fraud may have taken place (Ognyanova et al. 2021). Trump and his allies posted countless unsubstantiated claims about voter fraud on various social media platforms. Social media content analysis in the weeks following the election demonstrates that claims about election irregularities were by far the most shared posts in November 2020 (Hern 2020). The fact that tens of millions of people were prepared to believe baseless conspiracy theories without examining the evidence has immeasurable implications for democracy. One of the most fundamental ingredients of a stable democracy is that all major actors agree to play by the 'rules of the game', the most important of which is accepting electoral defeat (Weingast 1997). The integrity of democratic institutions is jeopardized when significant segments of the population are unable to sift through the barrage of misinformation disseminated over social media.

A growing number of information and IT professionals are working to combat this trend. Computer scientists have focused on developing algorithms to detect false information (Budak,

Agrawal, & Abbadi 2011; Ratkiewicz et al. 2021). Other tactics include developing warning tags and filters, ensuring user privacy rights, and preventing interference of autocratic foreign states in the elections of liberal democracies (Creech & Roessner 2019; Djordjevic 2020; Sirajudeen et al. 2017; Timmer 2016). Yet while there has been a recent evolution in thinking about IL, information science research and practice have maintained a focus on the procedural identification of 'trustworthy' or 'authoritative' information sources (Sullivan 2018). This includes fact-checking sites, library subject guides (Banks 2016; Batchelor 2017; Finley, McGowan, & Kluever 2017; Geiger 2017; IFLA 2017; Musgrove et al. 2018), as well as checklists intended to determine the quality of information sources (Auberry 2018). Addressing the quality of democracy more directly, Batchelor (2017) argues that librarians have a professional and civic obligation to promote critical thinking skills. He recommends tools such as the Washington Post Fact Checker and using the CRAAP (currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose) checklist in classrooms. The CRAAP criteria have been used to redesign library websites and content management systems (Auberry 2018; Johnson 2018). There is a growing body of library and information science literature that proposes similar strategies, relying on IL principles to teach people how to identify 'fake news' (Banks 2016; Burkhardt 2017; IFLA 2017; Mackey & Jacobson 2016; Sosulski & Tyckoson 2018). These are worthy efforts, but much of this work is taking place in a vacuum and does not sufficiently engage with the theory on democracy, power, and critical pedagogy. The epistemologies behind the CRAAP test and similar IL pedagogical methods share an underlying assumption that the 'truth' is out there and reproduce a dichotomy between authoritative and unreliable information. But these types of practices and the skills they seek to develop are not sufficient to foster the critical thinking practices that citizens require to exercise informed democratic citizenship.

Others have gone further by theorizing the relationship between information and democracy. Polizzi (2020) considers the different variants of democracy, pointing out that that the more participatory a system of governance is, the more knowledge is required of citizens. He argues in favour of a critical digital literacy that goes beyond questioning online content to incorporating knowledge about the Internet and how it both enhances and threatens democracy. Lewandowsky (2020) and Lewandowsky and Oberauer (2016) are among the few authors who link IL to the threats posed by authoritarian populist leaders. They acknowledge that 'post-truth politics' is a strategy in pursuit of an objective and suggest 'inoculating' citizens against misinformation. They present evidence that people are better prepared if they are warned that they might have been given misinformation and if their attention is drawn to the techniques used. But most of the authors focus on a particular type of skill set, such as digital literacy or IL, or a specific strategy for countering misinformation drawn from their area of expertise. We argue in favour of more cross-disciplinary dialogue between political science, critical pedagogy, and the various literacies related to information and digital media, in order to advance the development of a transtheoretical teaching model. This model must cut across educational institutions and civil society to fully counter the threats we are facing.

### **3. Power, politics, media concentration, and information**

Political scientists agree that unrestricted access to diverse sources of information is an essential ingredient of a modern democracy (Dahl 1982; Schmitter & Karl 1991). Access to information is essential to the health of democracy because it enables citizens to make *reasoned choices* rather than acting out of ignorance or emotion, and because information allows citizens to perform a '*checking function*' that ensures the integrity of public official (Center for Democracy 1999). Prominent political scientist Robert Dahl (1982, 2005) argues that access to alternative sources of information supports the development of basic democratic criteria, including *enlightened understanding* (the ability to critically analyze political issues and draw

conclusions that are not unduly influenced by powerful actors' preferences) and *effective participation* (engaging in the public sphere armed with the information required to make sound judgements. Kuklinski et al. (2000) review research that demonstrates that misinformation has serious political consequences; it produces collective preferences that are far different from those that would exist if people were correctly informed. This means that people who are unable to identify incorrect information will vote and mobilize against their own interests. Studies conducted with voters in countries such as the U.S. and Switzerland point to a tangible political impact; when provided with information and asked to reflect on it after elections, left wing parties would often have done better if citizens were better informed (Lutz 2003). Others demonstrate that if the public is uninformed or misinformed, they cannot establish meaningful positions around policy issues and are more susceptible to manipulation (Webster 2011).

Theoretical associations between information and democracy, which predate the age of the Internet, are frequently interpreted as access to information that is not controlled by the state. The dominant neoliberal economic model focuses on freedom of the privately-owned media to disseminate information according to market principles and without state interference (Asante 1997; Gunaratne 2002). Critical information theorists have argued, however, that in this context control of the instruments of information is monopolized by powerful private financial and economic interests that dominate domestic and transnational power structures. Thinkers associated with the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) movement argue that information should be valued as a social good rather than a commodity. They observe that while democratic states enjoy a variety of media outlets, there is uniformity in the messages these private commercial sources produce. This has created a communications structure dominated by private censorship and resulting in the exclusion of the voices of the majority and particularly the marginalized (Reyes Matta 1981; Somavía 1981).

Media concentration has grown exponentially since the days of the NWICO. In 1983, 90% of US media was controlled by 50 companies; by 2012, 90% of media outlets were controlled by only 6 conglomerates (Lutz 2012). The academic publishing world is not immune to ownership concentration; in 2013 70% of social science papers appeared in journals belonging to the top 5 publishers (Larivière, Haustein, & Mongeon 2015). All of this should lead us to think more carefully about what constitutes 'truthful' information. Media scholars have sustained their criticism of the liberal information control model over the past two decades. They argue that media concentration, particularly during the era of intensified globalization, has supported the creation of a Eurocentric worldview that promotes a reality that aligns with the interests of those who control the instruments of power, and ignores or devalues non-Western forms of knowledge and epistemologies (Artz 2015; McChesney 1999; Mignolo 2000). Power is therefore not only exercised through political and economic control, but also through the imposition of hegemonic forms of knowledge and representation (Campbell et al. 2004; Duno Gottberg 2004, 2011; Fernandes 2011; Hernández 2004; Lupien 2013).

While theorists who call for greater information pluralism do not engage with IL, the implications of their work are clear. The information landscape cannot be divided into reliable and unreliable sources, and 'traditional' outlets are increasingly concentrated and nestled within networks of power. The Internet allows, in theory, for the dissemination of information outside of both government and state control. But we have already seen how authoritarian populists are using these technologies to pursue their illiberal and anti-democratic agenda. Tufekci (2017) concludes that the problem in the social media era is not a deficit of but rather too much information, and that 'people lack effective means to quickly and efficiently verify it, which

means that information can be effectively suppressed by creating an even bigger glut of ... falsehood to foment confusion and distraction' (p. 230).

But 'fixing' social media platforms would merely be a Band-Aid solution. Manipulation may be facilitated by tools such as Facebook and Twitter, but such manipulation can be countered through an understanding of the power structures that produce it and by the ability to identify and reject misinformation. What is needed, then, is a pedagogical agenda for critical democratic citizenship that integrates an understanding of the relationship between power and information, and how this affects democracy.

#### **4. Democracy, critical pedagogy, and *conscientização***

Democracy should be understood as an 'essentially contested concept' in that its meaning is constantly and will always be subject to dispute and debate (Gallie 1956). Many twentieth century theorists of representative democracy are influenced by the work of Joseph Schumpeter (1942). Following Plato, he wrote that people are prone to 'irrational impulses' and inclined to use 'weak logic' to analyze complex matters (Schumpeter 1942, pp. 260-263). We must therefore, he argues, replace the unrealistic notion of government by the people with government approved by the people. This has been the dominant model of democracy since the end of World War II. Yet it has come under increasing pressure from both the left (which argues that representative democracy is neither representative nor democratic and that governments are controlled by the wealthy) and, increasingly, from the right. Citizens who feel that liberal democracy has not represented their interests are drawn to 'strong' leaders who claim to represent those who have been left behind (Norris & Inglehart 2019). But there is no evidence that populists actually deliver on their promises and, as we have seen, their strategies are largely based on false information and manipulation. Schumpeter would likely look at today's illiberal movements and reaffirm his suspicion of the ability of 'the masses' to make rational political decisions.

Direct-participatory democrats offer a more promising solution to people's disillusionment with representative democracy. They argue that democracy must be expanded and deepened, that participation in politics promotes self-development and more equitable outcomes, and that government is only legitimate when the governed are involved in decision-making. Participatory democrats emphasize the need for extensive citizen participation in government (Barber 1984; Fung & Wright 2003; MacPherson 1977; Pateman 1970). They argue that deepening democracy must go hand in hand with education that fosters critical thinking (Gaventa & Valderrama 1999; Sen 1999). But they rarely engage with IL theory and practice to consider how IL fits into the picture.

Power is at the heart of politics, and this extends to control of, or influence over, information. Michel Foucault uses the term 'power/knowledge' to signify that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, understanding, and social codes. While writing before the advent of social media, Foucault's work can help us to understand how power can be exercised in a networked environment. According to Foucault (1991), power is everywhere and is diffused and embodied in knowledge. The resulting 'regimes of truth' vary from one society to the next and are established through discourse. Discourse serves to determine the mechanisms through which truth is recognized, the means by which knowledge is learned, and the actors who are entitled to arbitrate over what is true (Fairclough 2001; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Van Dijk 2003). Discourse creates categories in which some are included as citizens while others are excluded. This may include notions of 'good' citizenship or of how states feel people should behave (Schinkel 2010). This kind of divisive discourse is at the heart of populism.



Foucault tells us that those who control discourse and the mechanisms for reproducing it are able to exercise considerable control, as these ideas and practices become naturalized (Foucault 1972; Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis 2000; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Van Dijk 2003). Inculcation occurs when people's thoughts and ideas are 'un-self-consciously' shaped by the discourse of those who control the institutions through which it is disseminated (Fairclough 2010). 'Regimes of truth' develop from the interaction of discourse and institutions, and are transmitted and reproduced through various mechanisms, including the education system, the media, political ideologies, and forms of cultural expression. Given the importance of social media in the twenty-first century, it is not unreasonable to add these technologies to the list of mechanisms involved in the 'battle for truth'.

So how can IL pedagogy evolve to incorporate a level of thinking that is truly reflective, critical, and that challenges power? A century ago, American educational reformer John Dewey (1922) promoted engagement in a participatory process aimed at democratic, collective problem-solving as a key ingredient in democratic education. For Dewey it is democratic education that encourages students to seek out information, but also to use this information to transform their perspectives. He viewed this process as evolving through a democratic classroom in which information-seeking (and other) skills would be developed through open discussion, active participation, and democratic problem-solving.

Paulo Freire (1970) takes a broader, politically oriented perspective, by linking information, power and oppression. Those who control information are able to create a knowledge system that both imposes their own worldview and limits the options that are open to dominated groups by restricting the marketplace of ideas. Information control can serve to ensure compliance by encouraging marginalized actors to internalize their own oppression and assume that it is inevitable and natural. In order to achieve empowerment, individuals must first develop basic literacy skills and understand how to find information (a process which is arguably facilitated by online tools). These skills are taught by school systems and universities but are insufficient to address what Freire calls the 'poverty of information'. Liberation from this 'poverty' requires developing critical thinking and self-reflection skills that identify the sources of power, break down and challenge discourse, and reject oppression. Freire calls this critical consciousness (conscientization, or *conscientização* in his native Portuguese). Critical consciousness involves the ability to recognize and analyze systems of power and inequality, and the commitment to challenge these systems. Freire proposed a pedagogical process that included identifying and understanding the structures and systems that create and sustain inequity (this would include discourse and media concentration), developing a sense of empowerment from this knowledge, and taking action to dismantle these oppressive structures. Like Dewey, Freire believes that individuals must be deeply involved in their own learning process, and that this must be linked to each student's individual needs through a democratic process. These concepts must be integrated into pedagogy and practice in order to develop a truly critical democratic citizenship that reimagines IL and responds to the challenges posed by our current political context.

## **5. Critical literacies: Information, media, digital, civic, and political**

Scholars and educators have produced vast bodies of theoretical literature and pedagogical practice models that develop various literacies intended to produce critical thinking. These critical literacies are aware of each other but are usually developed in isolation. They generally do not focus on concrete 'real world' problems, such as the threat to democracy posed by far-right populists.

IL theory and practice has shifted in recent years from an emphasis on information retrieval to a more complex focus on the politics of information. This shift is reflected in the recent revision of the Association of College and Research Library (ACRL)'s *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, one of the most well known and commonly used standards for libraries and information work. The 2015 revision introduced some fundamental changes to the Framework to reflect the 'rapidly changing higher education environment', noting that 'students have a greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge, in understanding the contours and the changing dynamics of the world of information' (ALA 2015, p. 7). Two of the new and most important values outlined in the 2015 Framework demonstrate a heightened awareness of the relationship between information and democracy: 'Information has Value'—the concept that 'value' may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices—and 'Scholarship as Conversation', which encourages awareness of multiple perspectives and opinions, and directs learners to look beyond familiar, predominant, privileged, and easily accessible sources of information. While viewed as a positive step forward by most, the revisions are considered by many to be less progressive than needed (Battista et al. 2015, p.112.)

While IL has traditionally focused on the act of finding and leading users to information, scholars within the field of Library and Information Science have promoted a critical IL that draws upon some of the theories and seeks to integrate critical pedagogy. Sara Franks notes that students 'need to learn to think critically about whose voices are not represented within a text that they find', acknowledging that information is carefully filtered and that decisions are made about what should (and should not) be represented (cited in Drabinski 2017, p. 46). She comments that we often talk about information in a way that gives it an 'apolitical, manifest, and predetermined quality...rather than the value-ridden and strategic acts that [information] processes actually represent' (Franks in Drabinski, p. 47). Melia Fritch notes that the emphasis on critical IL skills, rather than simple information finding skills, 'leads to students becoming critical thinkers and lifelong learners ... The impact of these students entering the larger society will clearly be seen as they will now be active members who are able to make informed decisions'. (Fritch 2018, p. 7). James Elmborg (2006) draws upon Freire's work and applies it directly to libraries and the work of librarians. He notes:

'Education for librarians must become what Freire calls a "problem posing education." With this shift, librarians will cease to study the "library-as-subject," and will instead become specialists in coaching intellectual growth and critical development. Learning becomes the essentially humanistic process of engaging and solving significant problems in the world, a process central to both teaching and learning.' (Elmborg 2006, p. 198)

Eamon Tewell, a librarian scholar, writes about the importance and the potential of critical IL, which he defines as 'a way of thinking and teaching that examines the social construction and political dimensions of libraries and information, problematizing information's construction and use so that library users may think critically about such forces.' (Tewell 2018, p. 10). Tewell urges librarians to move away from the mechanistic notions of information access and use toward a system of instruction that 'strives to recognize education's potential for social change and to empower learners to identify and act upon oppressive power structures' (Tewell 2018, p. 11).

While critical IL is a relatively new concept, Elmborg notes that 'critical theory and critical pedagogy have been well introduced into the discourse of librarianship' (Elmborg in Pagowsky & McElroy 2016, p. x). Evidence of this shift can be seen in the literature. A simple search of

scholarly articles related to critical IL finds that 50 in total were written in all the years before 2010, and 200 were published in the last five years. A survey of academic librarians published in 2018 ranked 'Teach(ing students) to critically evaluate the quality and usefulness of information' as the most important objective in IL, while the traditional 'teaching students to find information in various sources' ranked third (Julien et al. 2018, p.187).

Yet despite this important progress, a significant proportion of IL instruction remains trapped in the 'one-shot model', which relegates librarians to a service-provider role limited to training students and faculty to use databases (Bowles-Terry & Donovan 2016). Educators, activists, and progressive politicians must come to understand that IL is too important to be confined to short, add-on workshops to university courses. IL also needs to detach itself from practical tasks related to finding and evaluating sources for class-related assignments. This type of 'mechanical' instruction gives the impression that the usefulness of IL is limited to the classroom. We need to connect IL to what is happening in the world around us. The capacity of individuals to engage critically with information and the power dynamic that surrounds it is crucial to their ability to engage in the public sphere as informed, empowered citizens. Pedagogy must teach that even 'authoritative information' can be incomplete at best, or harmful at worst, if people lack critical consciousness and the capacity to analyze it. Mainstream media, including the most respected outlets, universally support the dominant neoliberal ideology (only the degree varies), in that they uncritically frame opponents to Western power as threats (Herman & Chomsky 1988; Pedro-Carañana, Broudy, & Klaehn 2018).

An equally important challenge is that IL theory and practice remain closely wedded to libraries. Whitworth (2020) criticizes the dominance of the information sciences in IL theory and practice; he identifies a need for IL to expand out of libraries. In an era characterized by misinformation disseminated strategically over social media to weaken democracy and attack pluralism, it is crucial that IL be integrated not only throughout all stages of the education system, but beyond. Furthermore, while the theoretical constructs we have explored in this paper—IL, democracy, power, critical pedagogy—are increasingly in dialogue with one another, this has not yet evolved into a transtheoretical framework in support of initiatives and pedagogical practice that integrate these concepts into a model for enhancing democracy.

Developing such a model requires not only a more critical and widespread IL but an integration of the various literacies that allow individuals to resist populist misinformation and manipulation. Each has something to contribute to a teaching model for democratic citizenship. Media literacy is closely related to IL and is essential to fostering strong democratic institutions. Critical media literacy produces an understanding of the relationship between power, ideology, and media. Relevant skills include questioning dominant narratives and recognizing the voices of those excluded from mainstream representations (Kellner & Share 2007). This approach also encourages audience participation in the process of making meaning, based on the premise that a more participatory democracy requires citizens to have opportunities to develop and disseminate their perspectives on sociopolitical matters (Mihailidis & Thevenin 2013). But Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) point out that it is essential to distinguish between questioning dominant narratives present in corporate media representations, which supports a healthy democracy, and attacks on media credibility by authoritarian populists for the purpose of deflecting criticisms of their misinformation and undermining democratic institutions. And others warn that media literacy must avoid questioning established information sources to the point of disregarding evidence, as respect for expertise is crucial for countering extremist ideologies (Cope 2010; boyd 2017). Media literacy cannot support democracy without a broader understanding of information, power, and politics.

Given the relationship between authoritarian populists, misinformation, and social media, digital literacy is also key to democratic citizenship in the twenty-first century. Research has demonstrated a positive correlation between digital media literacy education and increased online political engagement and exposure to diverse perspectives (Kahne et al. 2012). Polizzi (2020) describes critical digital literacy as a set of skills, abilities, and interpretations necessary for engaging with information in the digital age. But he points out that this must be about more than questioning content; it must also include knowledge about the digital environment, its socioeconomic characteristics, and the power structures behind it. We would add that this requires a far broader understanding of power beyond the digital world. The lack of knowledge required for enlightened understanding and effective participation predate the digital age, and the causes and consequences are much larger than this.

Finally, political and civic literacies must be at the core of any teaching and learning model for democratic citizenship. Polizzi (2020) describes political literacy as the ability to make informed judgements based on critical thinking and respect for truth and reasoning. Giroux (2017) associates civic literacy with the development of subjects capable of becoming social agents with the skills to demand—and know how to effectively participate in—more democratic institutions. But studies suggest that the (self-described) ‘leading’ democracies of the English-speaking world (Australia, Canada, England, and the U.S.) barely provide even the most basic civic education, much less the type of critical education we argue is necessary for a healthy democracy (Hughes et al. 2010; Sears 2014). In part, this may be due to an overemphasis on factual knowledge of political institutions. In order to prepare people for democratic citizenship, these literacies must induct subjects into the concepts, forms of argument, and intellectual skills required to think about politics and related processes (Davies & Hogarth 2004). This must include teaching people to justify their positions based on evidence.

Critical digital literacy and media studies have generally placed little emphasis on civic and political participation. Political research has rarely looked at whether citizens are able to evaluate information, focusing instead on the importance of developing factual information about institutions and processes of government. All of this suggests the need to combine all of the critical literacies discussed in this section together with critical pedagogy methods, to incorporate this model throughout all levels of education, and to seek new opportunities to embed learning experiences into civil society

## **6. Paths for pedagogy: Democratic citizenship education**

Giroux (2017) examines the link between authoritarian populism, democracy, and literacy. Referring to the political culture of the U.S. under then-President Trump, he laments that ‘Under the reign of this normalized ideological architecture of alleged common sense, thinking is now regarded as an act of stupidity, and ignorance a virtue. All traces of critical thought appear only at the margins of the culture as ignorance becomes the primary organizing principle of American society’ (Giroux 2017, p.15). He goes on to insist that this new form of illiteracy is intentionally nourished in order to depoliticize citizens and distract them from important political issues, while constructing a sense of community around the celebration of ignorance. Those of us who hope to counter this dangerous glorification of ignorance and its political consequences must intensify our efforts to thwart these challenges.

Can power be challenged in a context where more individuals than ever have the capacity to create and disseminate information, or will powerful actors continue to dominate discourse in cyberspace as they have in the ‘real’ world? Theory produced by Foucault and other thinkers suggests that true information democracy requires more than simply extending access to

information tools to more people and broader social classes. Following Foucault, Rabinow (1991) argues that challenging power requires us to detach the 'power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates.' Discourse transmits and reproduces power, but it offers the potential to challenge it (Foucault 1998, pp. 100-1; Gaventa 2003). In order for this potential to be realized, however, people first have to be able to recognize how power is exercised and reproduced. This requires a far more complex intellectual exercise than teaching people to distinguish between 'valid' and 'unreliable' information, because these categories themselves are defined by those who hold power and control discourse. We have argued that addressing the threats to democracy posed by radical populist movements and their misinformation campaigns requires an interdisciplinary theoretical and pedagogical democratic citizenship education that would bring together the knowledge of those who study information, media and digital tools, and those who best understand power and politics. It would draw on critical pedagogy and would integrate key concepts from critical literacies: Information, Media, Digital, Civic, and Political. This must happen at every level of the education system, but also outside of it. What would this model look like in practice?

Methods and concepts drawn from critical pedagogy can enhance the teaching of these vital literacies and tie them together. Freire (1970) argues that critical consciousness (*conscientização*) cannot be separated from information-seeking skills, as only through engaging with information sources outside of dominant discourse can power be challenged through what he calls critical consciousness. A better understanding of structures of power, coupled with how information is used by those who seek to hold power, would allow citizens to resist populist machinations. Fostering democratic citizenship means integrating critical consciousness and its exploration of power into pedagogy and practice (and vice-versa). Information professionals and other educators must make these connections if they are to support the development of skills that citizens need to play an informed role in the democratic process. Those involved in teaching the social sciences must understand the critical literacies and how they intersect with political science theories related to information, power, and discourse. IL, digital, and media literacies must engage with the development of a critical consciousness around power and discourse through a democratic, community-based learning process. This is particularly relevant in the current political climate.

A critical democratic citizenship pedagogy that combines key competencies of information, media, digital, and political/civic literacies must engage with and teach how *emotion and other cognitive processes* can influence how we interpret information. As Baer (2020) points out, information behaviours are driven by pre-existing beliefs, affect, convictions, and our own social identity indicators more so than evaluation of evidence. Pedagogical practices must therefore encourage deliberate self-reflection on our emotions and our positionality vis a vis other social groups. There is at least some evidence that learning about cognitive processes that cause people to react to information emotionally can cultivate a more dispassionate, critical approach to engaging with information (Pangrazio 2016). Critical self-reflection, which encourages people to explore their own affective responses to information, is therefore a good place to start. In other words, when learning about information, power, and democracy, people must also learn about themselves, about how they process information, and about how they are influenced by structures of power.

Challenging misinformation and those who would use it to undermine democracy cannot be limited to 'after the fact' damage control; we must consider methods for *pre-bunking or inoculation*. Lewandowsky and his colleagues suggest 'inoculating' people against misinformation before it is presented (Cook et al. 2017; Lewandowsky 2020). They present

evidence that people can avoid being misled if they are warned that they might be misinformed and if their attention is drawn to the techniques used to do so. This may involve, for example, presenting discursive tactics used by anti-democratic leaders to manipulate *prior to* providing real-world examples of how leaders deploy such tactics. This kind of instruction, combined with learning about the impact of affect and prior convictions on how we interpret information, can help the public to spot and resist disinformation campaigns.

We note that many of the authors cited above emphasize a need for ‘the public’, rather than only students, to develop these skills. This brings us to another key point. Critical democratic citizenship pedagogy cannot be confined to the ivory tower of academia. Political science research has long identified a correlation between low levels of education and authoritarian leanings (Lipset, 1981; Lutz 2003; Stone, Lederer & Christie, 2012). Support for Trump and his European counterparts is significantly lower among university educated voters (Bos et al. 2013; Inglehart & Norris 2016). But not all citizens attend university. The type of critical consciousness we are proposing must be integrated into school curriculum from the earliest years onward. Librarians, teachers, professors, and activists must collaborate to ensure that IL—in its ideal form—is taught and learned at all levels of education. Critical literacies must be integrated into the curriculum beginning with elementary school and continuing until graduation from university. Susanna Cowan notes that IL must ‘enter the *educational commons*, in the sense of a collaborative network of pedagogies and practices that crosses internal and external institutional boundaries’ (Cowan 2014, p. 30). This also means that teachers themselves must be fully information literate at every level, which may require us to evaluate the place of critical literacies in primary and secondary teacher education programs.

But this type of democratic pedagogy must also move beyond schools and embed itself in the public sphere. Information professionals and other educators generally agree that the solution to supporting information pluralism and democratic citizenship lies with education. But according to Foucault (1972) and others, the education system can also serve as a mechanism to inculcate students with values and ideas of the dominant classes. He characterizes the school system as an apparatus of the disciplinary power of the modern state. Students are not really taught to think for themselves, and are certainly not expected to question authority, but are disciplined into adopting the worldview espoused by those in power. In many ways, this is reflected in how libraries and much (but not all) IL instruction tends to divide information into binary categories of ‘trustworthy’ and ‘unreliable’.

Ajay Heble comments that ‘One of the most compelling, and indeed urgent, challenges for pedagogy has to do with showing how the critical and analytical skills that our teaching seeks to foster are related, in complex ways, to matters of public consequence’ (Heble 2017, p. 22). This is particularly true in an era of democratic decline. Giroux (2017) stresses the importance of public pedagogy. He argues that this is ‘central not only to politics itself but also to the creation of subjects ... willing to struggle against injustices and fight to reclaim and develop those institutions crucial to the functioning and promises of a substantive democracy (Giroux 2017, p. 17).’ And Giroux dismisses the myth that schools are, or should be, the primary agents of teaching and learning. He argues that the ‘reach of pedagogy extends from schools to diverse cultural apparatuses such as the mainstream media, alternative screen cultures, and the expanding digital screen culture’ (Giroux 2017, p. 17). In other words, pedagogy is embedded throughout the public and private spheres, from popular culture to media. Powerful actors use their control of media, entertainment, and social institutions to ‘teach’ the public how to think long after individuals have left school. We only need to consider the number of films that glorify war and the military (compared to the few that praise learning and science) to understand how

this works in practice. Populist leaders use their social media platforms—or state institutions when they gain power—to ‘teach’ their followers as well. Under these circumstances, pedagogy becomes a tool of control and a weapon against critical thinking (Giroux 2017). Resisting and reversing this form of ‘education’ as inculcation requires that critical democratic pedagogy meet power where it imposes itself: in the public sphere.

Ideally, this public pedagogy would be as pervasive and ubiquitous as the type of disciplinary teaching that Giroux describes. Realistically, this is difficult to achieve given the domination of media and entertainment industries by powerful corporate actors whose interests would be threatened by such a public pedagogy. One place to start would be to recognize information as a human right and not as a commodity. Democratizing the information landscape cannot happen by simply providing every citizen with tools to regurgitate ideas which are likely not a product of their own reflection (which social media does), but through the creation of a viable non-profit, non-commercial media sector that could bring elucidated alternative perspectives into the public sphere. Another path is to encourage the expansion of public participation in local public spheres, including initiatives such as participatory budgeting (PB). PB is a process through which citizens decide on how public funds are spent through inclusive participatory assemblies (Avritzer 2009; Fung & Wright 2003). Proponents of participatory democracy have long argued that citizen involvement in decision-making serves an educational function. Reporting on his observation of New England town hall meetings in the early 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized that through participation in public affairs, citizens develop skills and become better informed and this, in turn, allows them to participate more effectively (Tocqueville 2003 [1835]). In her influential work, Carol Pateman (1970) argued that participation in local decision making is a means of ‘learning democracy’; it is a sort of training ground for involvement at higher levels. Such participation fosters ‘psychological qualities’ required for engagement at the national level as well as the development and practice of ‘democratic skills’. PB has been implemented in cities from São Paulo to Chicago to Milan; a growing body of empirical studies demonstrate its educational effects (Font et al., 2014; Meléndez & Radinsky 2012; Schugurensky 2004; Su 2017). Expanding these types of participatory mechanisms would provide channels for more citizens to learn from within the public sphere.

Implementing this type of curriculum will be a challenge for many reasons, not the least of which hinges on a dearth of political will. Politicians know that the type of critical IL we are promoting makes citizens more likely to question why (and in whose interests) decisions are made, better equipped to fact check, and more likely to insist on participating in policymaking. There is a vicious circle here in that political actors will continue to resist reforms to education that would deepen democracy and eventually challenge their power, but educational institutions are controlled by those same political actors. Ideally, education should be taken out of the hands of politicians and not subject to ideological whims. It should be in the hands of a diverse range of experts (including educators, content specialists, Indigenous elders, and others depending on the jurisdiction). It should be managed by autonomous bodies, similar to post-secondary regulatory bodies that oversee degree programs and should include mechanisms that insulate education from political interference by those who benefit from ignorance. Proponents of this model will also have to fend off accusations that they are attempting to politicize teaching and learning. But educators must understand that pedagogy is always political because it is at the intersection of power and the acquisition of agency. Education and pedagogy do not exist outside of relations of power. We therefore need to reject concerns that critical pedagogy is political; a model that inspires people to think more critically in fact seeks to de-politicize education.

Another barrier is that teachers and other educators—including within civil society and participatory mechanisms—may themselves lack the skills required to teach critical pedagogies. A critical reconstruction of education must therefore ensure that teachers at all levels are engaged with the frameworks we discuss in this paper. But let us remember that critical pedagogy always involves bi-directional learning (Kellner & Share 2017; Davies & Hogarth 2004; Freire 1970). We must therefore look at designing these types of reciprocal learning experiences at all levels of the education system, as well as in the public sphere. None of these reforms will happen overnight; they will require considerable public engagement and pressure.

Developing the model we are proposing requires collaboration between practitioners and theorists from various backgrounds. Educators, for example, can support the development of new critical pedagogies but do not necessarily understand the Foucauldian relations of power that shape the education system, and the implications of this for developing critical consciousness. Political scientists study the relationship between information, discourse, and power, but most have not developed librarians' understanding of information itself (how it is created, disseminated, etc.). If information is power and power is at the core of politics, cross-disciplinary scholars concerned about creeping authoritarianism and how both new digital tools and 'traditional' instruments of information are used to support it would do well to collaborate on a new agenda for research, pedagogy, and theory building. This agenda should encourage political science, education, information science, and critical literacies to combine their divergent understandings of information into one stream of research, in order to combat the omnipresent and increasingly dangerous threats enabled by people's inability to engage in critical consciousness with respect to information.

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