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Centering Relevance in Information Literacy Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The process of determining whether a source of information is relevant is multidimensional, dynamic, and subjective. This essay puts information science scholarship on relevance, including the process and nature of making relevance judgments, in conversation with models of teaching and learning information literacy. Teaching librarians are encouraged to recognize students' relevance judgments as sites of reflection and instruction. This essay suggests a variety of ways librarians might do this, from re-thinking source evaluation methods to emphasizing the opportunities available at the source selection stage. The process of determining relevance is a practical site of reflective possibility and deserves greater attention in information literacy teaching and learning. Discussing relevance judgments can help students better understand and evaluate sources, reflect on their own and others' perspectives and motivations, and create opportunities to discuss the impact of information systems.

Keywords: relevance, information literacy, source evaluation, information behavior

Perspectives
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Centering Relevance in Information Literacy Teaching and Learning

The desire for relevant information animates the most sophisticated and extensive information searches, as well as a casual scroll on social media. Yet the process of determining what is relevant and to whom is surprisingly complex and nuanced. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines relevance as "relation to the matter at hand" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). But who determines the "matter at hand"? Relevance judgments, or decisions about an information source's value at a particular moment (Mizzaro, 1997), vary not only between people but also for the same person in different situations. In academic contexts, researchers find that students struggle to determine the relevance of sources (Bruce, 2008; Head et al., 2020; Steinerová, 2010). At the same time, the challenges of media and web-based information environments have made apparent the importance of teaching people how to evaluate the credibility of sources, while leaving relevance under-addressed, even as proprietary relevance algorithms heavily influence these same environments. For these reasons, evaluating sources for relevance in academic projects and everyday life comprises a crucial information literacy skill. Information literacy instruction should include more opportunities for students to assess source relevance explicitly, develop greater awareness of their relevance criteria and process, and better understand how information systems influence relevance judgments.

The impact of relevance is already present in many approaches to information literacy instruction. Relevance as a synonym for topicality is often included as a criterion in source evaluation methods. In addition, librarians regularly teach students how to identify their information needs and research questions in order to help them identify contextually appropriate sources. More recently, interest in algorithmic literacy encourages librarians to teach students about the impact of information systems in determining relevance by emphasizing how search result ranking works, the role of user data in feedback loops that influence algorithms, and the impact of algorithmic bias (Archambault, 2023).

Despite the diverse ways librarians attend to relevance, most of the scholarship on relevance as a concept and process key to understanding information use has come from the field of information retrieval, which is not typically put in conversation with information literacy (Julien & Williamson, 2011). In studies of information retrieval as well as information

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seeking, insights about relevance suggest additional implications for information literacy instruction. With these studies in mind, the goals of this essay are twofold. I want to put relevance research from information science in conversation with information literacy scholarship in order to highlight the need for librarians to support students' thinking about relevance. I also want to offer teaching librarians specific ways to recognize, incorporate, and discuss relevance with students. Variations in subject position, knowledge, purpose, and any number of other factors lead to differences in what someone considers relevant. Finding ways to surface, engage, and value those differences is important work for all information literacy practitioners who want to engage diverse groups of students and support their ability to think critically about information sources, particularly given the influential role of relevance algorithms in online search platforms.

The Nature of Relevance

Actual theories of relevance—predicting how it works—have proven elusive, partly because relevance implies a relational quality that can be evaluated from many angles. As Saracevic (1975), the primary information science scholar of relevance studies, put it:

> Relevance depends a great deal on what we already know and what is generally known. We must admit that there are various aspects that at times predominate in determining relevance, such as: what we think we want and how we ask for it; how we understand what is asked and what we think is really asked; what is wanted in contrast to what is really needed; who is asked, who is asking; what the situation is; what will be done with what is provided; and so on. In other words, we know that we can look at relevance from different points of view. And that is the problem. (p. 147)

Thus, relevance is multidimensional. Mapping and naming various dimensions have constituted a large portion of the relevance literature, which has been well-summarized by Mizzaro (1997) and Saracevic (2016, 2017). Many manifestations of relevance have been described, including but not limited to subject, system/algorithmic, cognitive, situational, and affective relevance (Saracevic, 2017). Information seeking and information literacy literatures have touched on all these manifestations and their implications for users and librarians, even though scholars sometimes have described them differently. The following discussion brings together common threads in information literacy, information seeking,

and information retrieval scholarship in order to draw out implications for teaching librarians.

Developing Relevant Inquiries

Relevance judgments evolve as knowledge about a topic increases. As models of information seeking (Kuhlthau, 2009) and Saracevic's (2017) synthesis of relevance studies have shown, people tend to become more selective about sources as they progress in their tasks. Topicality remains a central criterion throughout a task, even as what is considered topical may change. Kuhlthau's (2009) information search process model recognized the experience and attendant anxiety of developing and pursuing a relevant topic. Scharf and Dera's (2021) exploration of question formation as a part of an inquiry-based practice of information literacy also dealt directly with the challenge of relevance as it relates to topic formulation. They argued that developing an authentic and researchable question that meets time, situation, and user knowledge constraints is no easy task. This makes formulating relevant questions and selecting increasingly relevant sources an area of potential librarian support and instruction (Scharf & Dera, 2021).

Problem-based learning (PBL) also requires learners to think carefully about framing their concerns or topics before identifying relevant sources. In one case study of using PBL in information literacy instruction, Wenger (2014) concluded that librarians must spend more time helping students define information needs to research challenging problems. Though not using the language of relevance, the care for establishing context and need is similar to inquiry-based learning and Swanson's (2004) critical information literacy model, which will be discussed later. Wenger (2014) did not explicitly state that students' ability to evaluate sources for relevance is necessary for problem-based learning, but it is difficult to imagine that students will succeed without doing so. Librarians engaged in inquiry and problem-based learning methods deal with topical and situational relevance as they help students shape queries and define problems. Librarians can also help students understand that their sense of topicality will likely shift as they learn more.

Relevance and the Process of Evaluating Sources

Though librarians regularly teach source evaluation, some methods and approaches for doing so tend to reduce the role and challenge of relevance significantly. Studies of students' academic information use have recognized the significant impact of task, moment in time, and other situational factors on relevance judgments (Taylor, 2013; Taylor et al., 2007).

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They have shown that students use multiple criteria to evaluate relevance, such as ease of use and accessibility (Kim & Sin, 2011). Fitzgerald and Galloway's (2001) examination of users of virtual libraries also drew a distinction between "relevance-related reasoning" and evaluative reasoning about source quality. They concluded that these cognitive processes occur concurrently and influence each other but involve different mental processes (Fitzgerald & Galloway, 2001).

In a study of undergraduate and graduate students' decision-making as they did research for a literature review, Bruce (2008) suggested that students would benefit from becoming more aware of their own motivations and thinking when making judgments regarding relevance. In another study of academic information use, Steinerová (2008) situated relevance assessments as an important aspect of source evaluation and noted concept mapping as a particularly useful tool for envisioning and developing relevance while seeking and using information (Conclusion, para. 1). Both studies suggest that determining relevance is an area where students would benefit from guidance and support.

Yet, in information literacy literature on source selection, relevance as a synonym for topicality belies the complexity of the concept. Relevance has long been a criterion of source evaluation in information literacy instruction models, including in the method known as the CRAAP test (Blakeslee, 2004). However, more recent information literacy approaches to teaching source evaluation have emphasized source quality or credibility (for comparisons of several source evaluation methods, see Liu et al., 2024 and Sye & Thompson, 2023). Methods such as SIFT (Caulfield, 2019), lateral reading (Addy, 2020), and other journalistic approaches (Elmwood, 2020) are primarily concerned with the credibility of information in web environments that feature substantial amounts of misinformation and disinformation. However, I wonder if focusing on source evaluation in a media environment has privileged credibility over relevance as the primary concern when looking at sources, leading to a limited understanding of and support for the process of making relevance judgments. Like credibility and quality, relevance is an area in which the critical evaluation of sources is needed. Not only is relevance more complex than a simple judgment about topicality, but, as will be addressed shortly, topicality itself can be challenging to assess.

In another one of the older checklist or acronym-based models, Mandalios's RADAR method, topical relevance plays a more central, significant role. Mandalios (2013) anticipated my argument about the importance of relevance, noting that

> students often fail to deliberate on [relevance] carefully enough and frequently print out dozens of pages from sources that have little or limited relevance. Requiring them to articulate exactly how each source is relevant and what it adds to their research helps them develop vital critical reading skills. (p. 475)

As summarized in their review of the applicability of different source evaluation frameworks for different learning situations and tasks, Sye and Thompson (2023) noted that both the much-critiqued CRAAP test (Benjes-Small et al., 2017; Meola, 2004; Ostenson, 2014) and RADAR contain elements that help students focus on source selection in part because they emphasize relevance. As they noted, source selection speaks to a particular task that requires more attention to relevance than what is provided by media literacy approaches focused on understanding web environments (Sye & Thompson, 2023). While media literacy strategies used in information literacy instruction have offered needed correctives to checklist approaches, they have not fully addressed students' need for support in making their own relevance judgments.

Relevance and the Role of Subject Expertise

Information literacy models that take seriously the subject knowledge needed to select and use sources in expert contexts have recognized a key element of determining relevance. In looking at what factors impact relevance judgments in a number of empirical studies, subject expertise has had a strong effect (Saracevic, 2017, p. 77). In other words, subject experts with a shared knowledge base are more likely to make similar relevance judgments than novices. Novices are more influenced by other highly variable individual factors, such as cognitive, situational, and affective ones (Saracevic, 2017, p. 79). In one of the few articles explicitly connecting information retrieval and information literacy, Saunders (2008) also noted findings from information retrieval studies highlighting the value of disciplinary knowledge in retrieving relevant results.

In another approach from the information literacy literature, Miller (2018) used the ACRL *Framework* and the Decoding the Disciplines model to draw out tacit disciplinary information literacy practices and values. Miller's focus on disciplinary literacy implicates subject expertise in making relevance judgments. For example, to draw out tacit disciplinary practice, Miller asked respondents which sources they considered important in scholarly conversations and how they knew. Here, "importance" functioned as a subject-based relevance criterion. This echoes information science scholars Hjørland's (2010) call to

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DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2024.18.2.7

understand subject relevance in the context of scholarly understanding. Miller's work also complements Saracevic's (2017) conclusion that expert users are more likely to make similar judgments about a source's relevance in relation to a particular topic or task. However, it need not only to be experts in academic disciplines that blend a deep sense of context, subject, and situation into the practice of information literacy, as illustrated in Lloyd's (2010) studies and conceptualizations of various workplace information literacies.

Still, the significance of academic subject expertise in determining topical relevance may influence librarians' focus on other aspects of information evaluation. Generalist information literacy educators may regard themselves or be regarded by others as lacking the needed subject knowledge to make relevance judgments, despite their expertise in information systems and organization. Even in cases where librarians do lack specialized subject knowledge, it does not necessarily follow that librarians cannot or should not address relevance with students. Such a conclusion relies on a limited understanding of how relevance judgments happen and a limited imagination of how librarians can support students' relevance assessments. At the same time, subject knowledge does matter in determining relevance and may deserve more attention in librarians' conceptions of information literacy development.

Understanding Relevance in Information Systems

As relevance is a relation between information systems and end-users, people who teach others how to use information retrieval systems are teaching about system relevance. While early information retrieval studies associated system relevance with objectivity and user relevance with subjectivity (Swanson, 1986), others have critiqued this notion. As Hjørland (2010) pointed out, information systems are not objective but operate from a particular subject position. The information considered relevant by a search engine or retrieval system represents the relevance judgments of people who designed, programmed, and trained the system and those who authored or created the information accessed and used. Search results also reflect the relevance judgments of other searchers, whose choices influence the auto-complete feature of search boxes and generative AI tools that learn from user-generated information.

Critical information literacy emphasizes the role of relevance by calling attention to the contexts and systems that shape information-seeking activity. In *Radical Information Literacy: Reclaiming the Political Heart of the IL Movement*, Whitworth (2014) traced the beginning of the information literacy movement to foundational understandings of relevance. These

early conceptions of relevance shaped the development of information retrieval systems and their role in economic growth and political liberalism. Librarians, libraries, and library systems are also intermediaries of relevance with particular subject positions (Whitworth, 2014).

In a more practice-oriented article introducing a model of critical information literacy instruction, Swanson (2004) critiqued the efficacy of retrieval systems to present relevant results by merely indexing search terms. They noted that "relevance is a user judgment that goes beyond the mere measure of presence, frequency, or absence of a term in a document" (p. 260). Swanson (2004) described a lesson plan on "Defining Relevance and Credibility" that emphasizes the context-based nature of relevance judgments (p. 268). Yet even in this model, the emphasis is on identifying and evaluating the *type* of information in order to assess relevance. While the significance of understanding type versus format is important for understanding how information works (an aim of critical information literacy), other aspects that might make a source appear relevant to a student are not emphasized. It is difficult to imagine that, in the critical pedagogical approach Swanson described, students would not have opportunities to share their relevance judgments, which often extend beyond assessing information types, as active participants in their own learning. However, those elements are not integrated explicitly.

Some recent research on system relevance has examined the context of commercial search engines and reintroduced the importance of algorithmic relevance. Sundin et al. (2022) coined the term "societal relevance" in their examination of Google search engine result pages during the COVID-19 infodemic. Societal relevance describes the relationship between an information source and "what is beneficial to society at large" (Sundin et al., 2022, p. 640), as determined by a system such as Google Search. This expands discussions of relevance into the structure of search engine result pages (SERPs) and their rules about which sources are included in sections such as AI-generated overviews and knowledge panels populated with preselected sources. Sundin et al. (2022) posed the question, "Could the fact that SERPs largely contain results from preselected sources (in knowledge panels or vertical results) hinder users in their information seeking, and, in that case, what could the implications be?" (p. 641). Asking how the presentation of information considered relevant for all users might impact diverse information needs aligns with critical information literacy's emphasis on recognizing the contexts of specific information practices.

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DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2024.18.2.7

In a review of relevance research across several decades, Saracevic (2017) called for more investigations into the proprietary relevance of commercial information systems and how people make relevance assessments when using social media platforms. While algorithmic literacy approaches have presented teaching models more than they have offered empirical studies of user behavior, they have drawn attention to how online platforms work and the ways in which relevancy rankings reinforce existing biases (Archambault, 2023).

Relevance Judgments as Metacognitive Moments

Two models of information literacy that emphasize the relationship of information seeking to learning also suggest that relevance judgments can become moments of reflection and metacognition. In connecting the evaluation of information to learning (developmentalism), Lenker (2017) wrote that "using learning as a standard for evaluation requires both a discerning eye for the information itself and a sophisticated awareness of the information's impact on one's thoughts and feelings" (p. 722). This articulation describes the cognitive and affective dimensions of relevance and the possibility of being aware of one's own relevance judgments. Bruce's *Informed Learning* (2008) also provided a framework for teaching and understanding how students use information to learn self-reflectively. In exploring the relationship between learning and using information, Bruce (2008) noted that "learners reflecting on information use are likely to improve the quality of their information-use processes" (p. 15). Bruce (2008) also demonstrated the principles of informed learning not only in academic contexts but also in workplaces and community contexts.

Relevance and the ACRL *Framework*

As a final lens on the role of relevance in information literacy, how does an influential document such as the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* regard relevance? Reading through the lens of relevance studies, I find the *Framework* supports a view of relevance as situational and subjective, emphasizes the cognitive work of making relevance judgments, and recognizes differences between novices and experts in assessing relevance. It also misses an opportunity to name relevance as an important value of information explicitly.

The "Research as Inquiry" and "Searching as Strategic Exploration" frames underscore the situational nature of relevance by discussing the "needs and nature of the search" (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL], 2015, p. 9) and the learner's ability to "determine an appropriate scope of investigation" (ACRL, 2015, p. 7). Here, the concepts of information need and scope suggest a determination of relevance according to the type of

search or task, a view supported by other research related to relevance (Mizzaro, 1997). The first part of the "Searching as Strategic Exploration" frame's introductory text also recognizes the cognitive work required to make a relevance judgment, stating that "searching identifies both possible relevant sources as well as the means to access those sources" (ACRL, 2015, p. 9). That a source *might* be relevant suggests that making a judgment about relevance involves a process. This frame also includes the disposition that learners recognize that "sources vary greatly in content and format and have varying relevance and value" (ACRL, 2015, p. 9), again contextualizing judgments about those sources—and their relevance—in the context of a particular search or situation. Relevance research has confirmed that determining relevance involves user-generated criteria, such as topicality, scope, and reliability (Xu & Chen, 2006).

The role of expertise is closely connected to the *Framework*'s treatment of relevance. The "Searching as Strategic Exploration" frame states that "experts may search more broadly and deeply to determine the most appropriate information within the project scope" (ACRL, 2015, p. 9). "Most appropriate" nods to the idea of relevance, with an understanding that relevance in particular contexts also implies shared values about whose voice counts as credible. This line of thinking continues in the "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual" frame. Here, learners are encouraged to "develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview" and also to identify who is likely to produce relevant and credible information for a given topic (ACRL, 2015, p. 4). This frame best captures the interplay between internal and external factors in shaping who and what is considered relevant to a particular conversation.

Omissions of Relevance

A puzzling absence of relevance in the *Framework* occurs in the "Information Has Value" frame, which primarily considers the value of information in legal and economic terms. "Value" could also be determined by qualities such as "importance," which represents a dimension of relevance in studies of information users in the academic environment (Steinerová, 2008), or "pleasure," a value of makers engaged in creative projects (Einarsson & Hertzum, 2021).

Relevance judgments also encompass actions beyond selecting or rejecting a particular source and include other forms of engagement with information, such as inspiration (Anderson, 2005). This exploration anticipates Ruthven's (2021) introduction of the term

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"resonance" to describe the feeling of responding to information, whether in the form of agreement, a sense of deepening emotion or connection, or a prompt to action. As Ruthven (2021) noted, resonance as an experiential manifestation of relevance connects well with the use of information for leisure and entertainment and in situations where emotion and imagination play a more prominent role, such as artistic and creative pursuits. Leaving out considerations of meaning, importance, and pleasure as part of the value of information truncates the possibility for relevance in the "Information Has Value" frame as it is currently written.

Rationale for a Greater Focus on Relevance in Information Literacy Instruction

Information literacy approaches have operationalized the concept of relevance in many ways. Some have relied on a subject-based definition of relevance, such as those that have incorporated it into source evaluation heuristics (Blakeslee, 2004; Mandalios, 2013). Others have emphasized its cognitive, affective, and situational aspects (Bruce, 2008; Lenker, 2017) or explored the impact of the system/algorithmic relevance assessments for information seekers in different contexts (Archambault, 2023; Saunders, 2008; Swanson, 2004; Whitworth, 2014). Most of these approaches center the person making relevance judgments. However, understanding relevance judgments is a learning opportunity for those in supporting roles, like librarians. It is an opportunity to observe students' decision-making processes and values. It is an exercise in perspective-taking. What someone believes is relevant to a particular situation or task is a small window into how they think and feel, what is important to them, and how they conceptualize what they are doing at that time. Culturally relevant pedagogy in library instruction has been a much more comprehensive approach to library instruction, but it contains a similar element in taking seriously the starting points and lived experiences of students and communities (Gupta et al., 2023; Quiñonez & Olivas, 2020). As a small step, welcoming the variety of students' relevance judgments could provide a micro-opportunity to bring students' own thinking and experience into the information literacy classroom.

Practical Suggestions for Teaching with Relevance in Mind

The literature reviewed in this essay has revealed existing practices and possibilities for addressing relevance. First, librarians can help students and course instructors recognize that relevance is something of a moving target. What appears relevant early in a project may not be perceived as such later, but that does not mean that the source is categorically

irrelevant. Second, quality and relevance are both important in selecting and evaluating sources, and source evaluation methods employed to help students select sources should not minimize the importance of relevance. Third, relevance judgments can be a source of reflection for students, instructors, and librarians. Fourth, the changing nature of online search platforms is prompting new opportunities to think about the role of relevance. Given the many ways relevance plays a role in information seeking and use, the remainder of this essay will be devoted to specific ways librarians can use relevance research to guide their teaching, filtered through my own experience and perspective.

Supporting Students in Making Relevance Judgments.

I have often asked students to "choose a source on your topic" for the purpose of some other learning outcome related to search strategies, source evaluation, etc. Over time, I have seen that "choosing a source" and determining what is "on your topic" are relevance judgments worthy of time and discussion. Slowing down these steps by paying attention to relevance can bring out opportunities to hear and develop student thinking about information sources. There is value in asking questions such as,

- Which of these sources might expand or challenge your understanding?
- How do you imagine you could use this source?
- What would motivate you to read this source? If you had time to read it, what would you be interested to find out?

Even a simple question such as "Why did you choose (or ignore) this source?" or "Why is it sometimes hard to choose a source?" can be productive for developing student thinking and aiding librarians or instructors in understanding student research processes. There is no wrong answer to these questions, only thinking that can be built on and reflected on. Paying attention to relevance in these ways can even help librarians better understand disciplinary faculty values and thinking about information, as Miller's (2018) disciplinary literacy model makes clear.

Fitzgerald and Galloway's study (2001) of virtual library users included an appendix of study participants' own excellent questions about relevance, such as "Does it have enough information to make it worthwhile?," "Does it provide a connection to other information?," and "Is this something I can afford to ignore?" (p. 1006). In this spirit, librarians could ask

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students to develop their own questions to evaluate relevance. Articulating one's criteria for relevance can help students develop a more reflective information literacy practice.

Some students, pondering the relevance of a potential source, acknowledge that they would need to read more before making an informed decision about its value or use. Discussing relevance underscores the importance of reading sources, not just finding them and using various heuristics to evaluate them. There are many ways to model and teach reading in an academic library context (Rempel & Hamelers, 2023). Even so, reading takes time and attention. This is a limitation of emphasizing relevance in a single class session: reading for relevance takes time, and various factors can impact reading speed. For this reason, librarians can take care to emphasize relevance judgments as provisional and likely to change over time as tasks and knowledge evolve.

Supporting Students in Selecting Sources

Focusing on the moment of source selection in relation to a particular task might also prompt librarians and instructors to rethink the complexity of assessing relevance. Many do this already by encouraging the use of tertiary sources to become familiar with a topic at the beginning of a research project. However, drawing out student assessments of relevance may also require rethinking a more initial, prescriptive emphasis on source evaluation, though I am not suggesting discarding evaluative approaches altogether. I am saying that librarians and instructors should try to solicit and explore judgments about relevance, including topical relevance, even if source quality does not meet the desired criteria. Looking for relevance is part of human information behavior and is also its own challenge. An approach to information literacy that acknowledges this as a starting point may be more effective in bridging students' existing information practices to desired skills and outcomes.

Librarians frequently model database searching and use instructional time to encourage students to search for and select sources themselves. How might a focus on relevance inform this activity differently? One lesson I have learned here is to take care to conclude demonstrated searches at the point of selecting a possible source and explaining why I chose that particular one. Without reaching the selection step, demonstrating how to search, only to stop before selecting a source, cuts off an opportunity to share my relevance criteria aloud with students. Students who are less familiar with a subject may need to see how a particular article, even a particular section or sentence from an article, can be brought to bear on a sample topic or question. While an expert may be able to determine from the title or

abstract alone whether a source is relevant to a project, this is more challenging for novices and people with less subject knowledge.

Recognizing Perspective in Relevance Judgments

In a classroom setting, sharing the results of individual relevance judgments and emphasizing how different people might come to different conclusions about the same question or information source provides an opportunity to negotiate relevance as a community and allow for difference. In my experience, asking a class, "How relevant do you find this source?" in relation to a question or topic usually leads to several different explanations. People may notice different features of the source and learn from one another in the process. These moments can revitalize opportunities for discussion, productive disagreement, and perspective-taking in a classroom context. The goal is not to arrive at a correct answer as to what is most relevant but to articulate the thinking behind the decision and be able to consider the thinking of others. When the librarian is a guest instructor in another's class, and there are specific expectations as to what the course instructor would view as more or less relevant sources, these can be explored with a greater understanding of where students are starting. In my experience, these contexts can even be an opportunity to invite the instructor to share more of their own relevance criteria with their students.

Encouraging Critical Examination of Algorithmic Relevance

Information literacy educators are often eager to discuss information use in students' everyday lives as well as academic contexts. Beyond source selection, focusing on relevance can also create opportunities to explore the role and nature of information systems in determining what is relevant or not. Algorithmic literacy emphasizes understanding how the algorithms that drive online platforms work. Archambault (2023) made several suggestions as to how librarians might do this, including comparing search results while logged in to a platform versus not and recommending Bakke's (2020) "Search Reflection Assignment," which asks students not only to reflect on how they search but also how they imagine the search platform works.

Sundin et al.'s (2022) questions about the consequences of preselected sources lead to other questions about the limitations of pursuing relevance, whether at the system or user level. Students might be asked to recall and reflect on a specific search experience when they did not find the initial results relevant to their needs and why they thought that was. In class,

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students could also be asked to evaluate sources preselected for specific topics and consider them using the *Framework*'s "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual" frame.

What about situations in which different perspectives or unexpected information sources and formats are desired? In creative and artistic pursuits, sources may well be considered "irrelevant" until they are combined with others in new ways. Part of information literacy education may also involve teaching people how to find and experience information that is not designed to be relevant. Asking students about the last time they engaged in browsing behaviors or providing an opportunity for them to do so with digital or physical collections challenges the idea that information seeking is always about solving a problem or answering a question. While online platforms are eager to create browsing-like experiences, the role of commercial entities in structuring these platforms can be a worthwhile topic of analysis for a class or assignment.

Supporting the Experience and Absence of Relevance

Librarians can also maintain an awareness of what it is like to experience relevance (resonance) or its absence in response to a search. While some assignments may feel to students like little more than externally derived tasks, others involve topics that do feel meaningful and personal. The stakes for relevance are higher, and librarians who are not the instructor of record for a class may not know students' relationships to their topics, classes, or assignments. The presence, absence, and judgment of relevant results can be an emotional or harmful experience due to algorithmic bias. Nowhere has this been more eloquently and passionately described than in Noble's (2018) work, *Algorithms of Oppression.* The emotionality of searching for and making decisions about information is true for topics touching on aspects of identity, particularly marginalized ones. It can also be true for topics that are important to students in other ways. Some library teaching contexts have limited time for additional approaches that address the reasons behind algorithmic bias, such as algorithmic literacy. In these cases, I suggest that librarians can still be aware of the affective dimensions of searching for relevant information, both in the searches they model during instruction and in students' experiences during hands-on search time.

Conclusion

Relevance judgments are complex and multidimensional. They also have real impacts. A scholar's research may or may not be judged relevant to a particular scholarly outlet, impacting the dissemination of that work. The sources a student considers relevant for a

research assignment may not meet the criteria for relevance held by the student's instructor, impacting their grade. In civic life, what one voter regards as the most relevant issues in a particular election can be quite different than another, and whether a politician speaks to those issues or not may determine whose votes they receive.

The degree to which information systems influence judgments about what is relevant cannot be underestimated. Online platforms determine relevance based on numerous factors, including commercial interests, demographic data, search terms, and previous searches and clicks. The biases of information creators, system designers, and users are remixed and reconstituted in search results, potentially amplifying biases and assumptions about what is important and to whom.

Relevance deserves more attention in the development of information literacy, both because of the real challenge of determining topicality and the many other dimensions of relevance. This essay seeks to embrace, not reduce, the complexity of relevance in information literacy instruction and encourage other information literacy educators to do the same. If relevance is a guiding force in the search for information, then it should play a central role in contexts where people are developing their information literacy abilities.

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