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## Critical Theory and Information Studies: a Marcusean infusion

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**ABSTRACT** In the field of library and information science, also known as information studies, critical theory is often not included in debates about the discipline's theoretical foundations. This paper argues that the critical theory of Herbert Marcuse, in particular, has a significant contribution to make to the field of information studies. Marcuse's focus, for instance, on 'technical rationality' as a tool of domination in modern capitalist society is a useful construct for understanding how discourses of information technology are being used to perpetuate modernist notions of information and capitalist logics of consumption. It is argued here that critical theory theory and critical theory of technology have a particular relevance and salience to the study of information, and that any discipline that claims to study the creation, use, classification, and access of information simply cannot ignore the larger socio-political critiques of modern, technological society that Marcuse proposes.

### Introduction

In the field of library and information science (LIS) or information studies (IS) (as it is sometimes called in its newer, 'information age' incarnation), concerns about about 'theoretical foundations.' The field itself consists of a variety of disciplines – such as library studies, information science, archival studies, and informatics– and this diversity in subject areas does not lend itself to a unified theory. Yet, a fundamental anxiety exists about the lack of a proper theoretical framework in the field (Pettigrew & McKechnie, 2001). Critical theory, in the tradition of Marx, Gramsci, Lukacs, and Marcuse (to name a few), however, is nearly absent from any LIS debate about theoretical foundations.

While no 'unifying' theory exists in the field of IS, various theories are utilized, and research has shown that theory is playing a stronger role than previously observed in the information science literature, with over 100 distinct theories having been developed in information science (Pettigrew & McKechnie, 2001). Many of the theories utilized, particularly in information science, however, are based on positivist epistemologies. For instance, a notable information science pioneer, B.C. Brookes, argued for a science of information, in which information science would deal primarily with Karl Popper's World 3 of 'objective knowledge' (Brookes, 1980). While information science tends to be influenced by positivist epistemologies, the range of theoretical outlooks in information studies also includes historical and humanist epistemologies.

Despite the lack of critical theory and critical frameworks in IS, however, a few notable scholars in the field have provided some much-needed critical interventions. For instance, with regard to LIS, Wayne Wiegand (1999) issued a call to address the 'tunnel visions and blind spots' (p. 1) that plague discourses and studies of American librarianship. In response to Wiegand's exhortation, a special issue of *Library Quarterly* (Volume 73, Number 1) was published in January 2003, with various authors addressing critical theoretical interventions into LIS. Scholars such as John Budd (2001, 2003), Douglas Raber (2003), Bernd Frohmann (1994, 2004), Gary Radford (2003), Gerald Benoit (2002), and others have introduced various critical frameworks into LIS and IS, drawing from scholars as diverse as Foucault, Gramsci, Hall, and Habermas to question some of the

fundamental assumptions and 'blind spots' of the field. Even before this more recent infusion of critical theoretical frameworks, Michael Harris (1973, 1986) critically interrogated commonly held assumptions about the development of the American public library, as well as the dominance of positivist epistemologies in LIS.

Thus, it would be unfair to say that a 'critical tradition' does not exist in LIS and IS; however, it is not widespread in the discipline, and as will be discussed throughout this article, the work of Frankfurt School critical theory, particularly the work of Herbert Marcuse, has not had a large impact in IS. I argue here that Marcuse's work, especially his critique of technological society, can make an important contribution in the interrogation of professional discourses in IS, as well as popular discourses of the 'information society.'

### Critical Theory in the Context of IS

Critical theory is arguably not fully understood within the context of IS, as it is often lumped together with other 'critical' traditions such as postmodernism and post-structuralism. Thus, in this case, critical theory, in its broadest sense, refers to theory that can undertake a systematic and dialectical analysis of the economy, the state, and the political realm and its linkages to culture, ideology, and everyday life (Kellner, 1989). In this particular case, critical theory is highly relevant to a critique of techno-capitalism and its association with information society ideology. Critical theory's interrogation of techno-capitalism is of growing importance, mainly because of the increased importance of culture, technology, media, information, knowledge, and ideology in more domains of social life (Kellner, 1989). It can be argued that libraries are precisely the points where techno-capitalist ideologies of the information society are gaining more of a foothold, and thus critical examinations are needed in order for emancipatory alternatives to be formulated. Critical theory consists of dialectical analysis, which involves both making connections and demonstrating the contradictions that provide the opening for political intervention (Kellner, 1989).

With this understanding of critical theory in mind, one of the few significant 'critical theorists' in IS is Ronald Day (2001), whose book, *The Modern Invention of Information: discourse, history, and power*, argues that the 'information revolution' is a modernist trope, related to dominant professional and technical interests. He sees the discourse of information as an uncritical, modernist trope, occurring together with notions of scientific modernism. Day argues that a historical sense of information is lost, as information, in its modern sense, is reified and commodified. More affective, process-oriented conceptions of information are lost in a rhetoric of progress and technological 'boosterism' (Day, 2001).

Day's work is useful and significant, in that it is one of the few critical interventions from an IS perspective into the 'information society' rhetoric of governmental policy and information professional sectors. He draws fundamentally upon the work of Martin Heidegger (from the standpoint of a metaphysical critique of information), and Walter Benjamin (for a Marxist critique of information). While Day provides a much needed and useful framework for critiquing the underlying modernist and capitalist assumptions of information discourses, very few people within traditional LIS are taking up his example of using critical theory as a tool for analysis. Scholars in other disciplines, as varied as communication studies and sociology (e.g. Kevin Robins and Frank Webster), for instance, have engaged in critiques of the techno-capitalist and neo-liberal assumptions of information discourses. But largely, IS scholars (except for the few mentioned earlier) remain strangely absent in engaging with this form of critique, especially so given the fact that IS scholars are primarily concerned with 'information.'

Despite the work of Day, critical theory's appearance in IS (when it is rarely invoked) usually takes the form of references to Habermas, and his notions of the public sphere and theory of communicative action. Habermas's work is certainly valuable and useful for IS, especially since his focus on communication issues resonates with many of the concerns of information studies. What remains puzzling, however, is the lack of reference to other Frankfurt School theorists, most notably Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. In particular, the work of Herbert Marcuse is highly pertinent to the field of information studies. Marcuse's focus, for instance, on 'technical rationality' as a tool of domination in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) is a useful construct for understanding how discourses of information technology are being used to

perpetuate modernist notions of information and capitalist logics of consumption. Information science, with its postivist, apolitical logic of processes such as 'information retrieval' and 'information access,' is itself a creation of a post-World War II information revolution that is part of a larger political process of scientific modernism (Day, 2001). Much of the information revolution rhetoric (that IS derives its current increased sense of importance from) is based on what Webster calls 'technocapitalism' (Webster, 2002).

The rest of this article will interrogate ways to incorporate Marcuse's critical theory into the discipline of information studies. It is argued here that critical theory has a particular relevance and salience to the study of information, and that any discipline that claims to study the creation, use, classification, and access of information simply cannot ignore the larger socio-political critiques of modern, technological society that Marcuse proposes.

### **Marcuse's Relevance to IS**

A recent trend in some schools of LIS is the focus on diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice. Often, however, this focus on social justice is undertheorized, and is largely uncritical in nature. Social justice itself is a critical, radical concept, but in its usage in IS, lacks critical foundations. Incorporating and building upon Marcuse's ideas can help bring this 'critical' aspect into concepts like social justice, giving information studies a foundation for radical critique into modern information discourses and practices. The bane of professional schools (Day, 2000), of which IS is a prime example, is the reliance on uncritical frameworks that often rely on dominant political and economic interests. While this fact permeates professional schools, critical theory, if incorporated into IS, can perhaps help the field move away from conformist, professional discourses.

Marcuse's importance to IS is seen in his discussion of 'technological rationality,' a creation related to 'that of an advanced society which makes scientific and technical progress into an instrument of domination' (Marcuse, 1964, p. 16). This sense of technological rationality is related to a notion of 'purposive-rational action,' in which 'the "rationalization" of the conditions of life is synonymous with the institutionalization of a form of domination whose political character becomes unrecognizable' (Habermas, 1989). In other words, the logic of instrumental rationality and technological rationality is politically, economically, and socially institutionalized. These forces of domination lead to conformity and indoctrination, in which 'one-dimensional' men are created. The one-dimensional man takes part in one-dimensional thought and behavior, 'in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe' (Marcuse, 1964, p. 12). Thus, the logic of instrumental rationality creates conditions where critical thought and emancipatory action are stifled.

The one-dimensional man, in a sense, suffers under a form of 'false consciousness,' as Lukacs (1971) discusses. Technological and instrumental rationality are the logics of an 'ideological state apparatus' (Althusser, 2001) that maintains the status quo, and perpetuates technological and techno-capitalist ideologies. At the root of Marcuse's argument is the critique of 'positive thinking and its neo-positivist philosophy' (Marcuse, 1964, p. 225) and its associated, distorted logics of efficiency, rationality, and 'progress.' As discussed earlier, these positivist tendencies, especially with regard to information science, continue to dominate LIS.

Marcuse's particular form of critical theory forces information studies to critically assess its foundations and its construction of a modern notion of information. This modern construction of information is intimately tied with the growth and rise of science and the ideologies of technological and instrumental rationality that Marcuse criticizes. Information, which was often associated with the 'process of informing,' became an increasingly reified and commodified entity in a modern, post-World War II environment (Day, 2001). Frankfurt School theorists, including Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, were also interested in this idea of how "'knowledge" became divorced from "information," norms from facts' (Bronner, 2004). Information, in its modern sense, became dissociated from affective, contextual, and cultural processes, thus making it much easier to be commodified, reified, and abstracted.

### Marcuse and Critiques of Libraries in the 'Information Society'

Marcuse's critiques of technological society are also highly appropriate to an interrogation of the 'information society' ideology dominating both international information and communications technology (ICT) policy circles and current discourses of international librarianship. In particular, Marcuse's emphasis on the link between technical and political rationality is relevant in discussing discourses of the information society. The idea of an information society continues to be a source of debate and interest in academic, political, and popular circles. A term that gained in popularity with the rise of computerization, it also began being used in economic circles, most notably with the work of Fritz Machlup in the United States, who began to define 'information industries' (Machlup, 1962). Webster (2002) talks about the multifaceted dimensions of the information society concept, showing how it has variously been defined in technological, economic, spatial, and cultural terms. Given the different definitions surrounding the information society concept, it is not always clear what the information society represents, and how it can be recognized and measured. For instance, it is not certain whether an information society is distinguished by the increasing economic importance of information, the increase in ICT-mediated cultural products, or increased access to education and information (Webster, 2004).

Webster also emphasizes the development of the information society in an environment of neo-liberalism and corporate globalization, where global capitalism has greatly extended its reach and is the 'only game in town.' He is of the opinion that the information society concept is tied in with corporate, techno-capitalist interests. In addition, he locates the information society as having its roots in Taylorism and instrumental rationality.

Marcuse's focus on technical and political rationality in his critique of technological society parallels much of Webster's and others' critiques of the information society. Much of this critique is related to a discourse of information that is rooted in the logic of neo-liberalism and techno-capitalist economic and political rationality. Little work has been done, however, in linking these critiques of the information society with LIS and IS. Marcuse's insights regarding technological society can provide a bridge to understanding how the techno-capitalist and neo-liberal information society discourse is related directly to LIS and IS concerns. For instance, a global discourse is emerging about the roles of libraries in developing an 'information society.' The importance ICTs is undeniable in today's world, and the emergence of a global information society is of significance to a wide range of actors, from national governments, corporations, international development agencies, and civil society.

Information institutions such as libraries are joining in on this information society debate as well, arguing for the role of libraries in the development of an information society (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions [IFLA], 2005a). IFLA is taking center stage in the promotion of libraries as a fundamental part of a global information society. IFLA is the international representative of libraries, speaking largely on behalf of national library associations in the world. It is placing a great emphasis on its current efforts in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), with IFLA president Alex Byrne delivering an address to the WSIS plenary (IFLA, 2005b) and through the development of the 'Alexandria Manifesto on Libraries, the Information Society in Action,' in which libraries are envisioned as 'builders' of an information society (IFLA, 2005c). The WSIS is a two-part United Nations conference that seeks to build a 'people-centered and inclusive' information society (WSIS, 2003), but is influenced to a large degree by European Union information society policies that link access to ICTs with increasingly neo-liberal free market ideologies.

As discussed earlier, the concept of an information society is a contested terrain, understood at various social, political, economic, and theoretical levels. Thus, the role of libraries in 'building' an information society needs to be critically examined. Specifically, what libraries are building, and for whom, remain important concerns. In addition, the discourse of 'information' itself is important within libraries – while libraries are concerned with 'information,' it could be argued that the library profession uncritically accepts and adopts dominant discourses of information. These dominant discourses of information are related to post-World War II techno-science modernist projects (Day, 2001) and the logics of the political and technical rationality of advanced capitalism. This type of 'information paradigm' (Apostle & Raymond, 1997) is at the heart of a repositioning

strategy to define the ethics, roles, and purposes of physical libraries in the so-called information society.

While library professional associations such as IFLA and international organizations such as UNESCO have argued for the cultural, democratic, public service, and communitarian ethics of libraries, the discourse of libraries being constructed at the WSIS focuses mainly on libraries as access points to ICTs (Pyati, 2005). Moreover, the information society concept, as it is used in policy circles and exemplified in the WSIS, is highly influenced by ideologies of privatization and deregulation (Webster, 2002). The information society of the WSIS needs to be examined within the larger context of economic globalization, in which techno-capitalist and neo-liberal ideologies hold sway (Pyati, 2005). Many have argued that within this context of advanced capitalism and economic globalization, information as commodity is a dominant logic (Schiller, 1994). In addition, the context of economic globalization is dominated by entities such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), which contains treaties and provisions that may make it easier to privatize library services (Rikowski, 2005). Thus, a central tension exists between the traditional public service ethic of libraries, and an information society framework that is linked to privatization strategies that can further commoditize information.

### **A Library-Centered Critical Theory of Technology**

As IFLA mentions in the WSIS documents, libraries can be ICT access points, and also ICT learning centers. However, what is often missing in the discourse surrounding ICTs and libraries in the larger context of LIS is the role libraries could potentially play in shaping technology for more inclusive and radical democratic ends. Some of this technology shaping can take the form of active library technology development for user communities.

With this idea in mind, Marcuse's critique of technological society and his vision of 'liberating potentialities,' as well as critical theory of technology (Feenberg, 2002), can develop a theoretical framework that more fully envisions libraries as active participants and shapers of ICTs for progressive and democratic ends. In response to this need for alternative, counter-hegemonic action strategies in IS and LIS, I am proposing a library-centered critical theory of technology, which draws particularly from Marcuse's critique of technological society, as well as Feenberg's critical theory of technology. Feenberg, using Marcuse as a foundation and starting point, argues against technological determinism, and the idea that technology is a 'neutral tool.' Technology in this construct is not neutral, but rather embodies the values of a particular industrial civilization and of technocratic elites that promote this technology (Feenberg, 2002). Technological rationality also often becomes political rationality, reinforcing technologically mediated solutions that reflect dominant political and economic interests (Feenberg, 2002).

Feenberg's critical theory of technology is a 'radical philosophy of technology' (p. vi) that seeks to reconstruct the idea of socialism based on a democratization of technology and technically mediated institutions of society (Feenberg, 2002). While technology is value-mediated and not neutral, a certain 'ambivalence' exists in technology, an indeterminacy that allows for it to be shaped by social forces (Feenberg, 2002). Thus, while technology reflects dominant political and economic interests, potential exists for technology to be shaped for democratic ends.

This type of technology shaping can take many forms. While libraries are frequently mentioned as important players in developing an information society, information infrastructures, and ICTs, there is a notable lack of critical theorizations of technology use by libraries. Libraries are precisely the points where techno-capitalist ideologies of the information society are gaining more of a foothold, and thus critical examinations are needed in order for emancipatory alternatives to be formulated.

The form of this critical theory-informed technological activism is yet to be determined in the context of libraries; however, this type of activism would reflect a shift in orientation that envisions libraries as active agents in shaping technology for radical democratic ends and contesting ideologies of commoditization, privatization, and technological determinism. This critical theory of technology orientation can help in separating the ideologies of the information society from the discourses of technology. While the information society of the WSIS and other dominant discourses 'package' together the ideologies of privatization and deregulation with ICTs, critical

theory of technology posits that this does not have to be the case. The discourse of ICTs does not have to necessarily be part of a free market, capitalist ideology, but can serve more radical democratic aims, particularly in democratizing access to information and knowledge. Libraries, in becoming active developers and shapers of ICTs for democratic and progressive ends, may help to combat some of the hegemony of the dominant information society.

An information society that is associated with techno-capitalism, neo-liberalism, and ideologies of deregulation can ultimately undermine the basis of the public service mission of libraries. In a certain sense, libraries with public service mandates (particularly public and certain academic libraries) act in some degree as 'anti-capitalist spaces' and have the potential to reframe an information society in a more radically democratic, culturally inclusive, and progressive vision. Thus, the library can serve as a center where the dialectical tension between regressive and progressive visions of an information society takes place, exposing contradictions in the dominant techno-capitalist vision of an information society, and opening up library-centered emancipatory visions. These visions, however, require a critical theoretical framework to guide informed action, something that is sorely lacking. A library-centered critical theory of technology inspired by Marcuse's and Feenberg's visions may help provide this type of framework.

### Conclusion

This library-centered critical theory of technology is one example of a strategy of action inspired from Marcuse's critiques of technological society. These types of theorizations and frameworks to guide radical democratic action are needed, especially given the growing commercialization of the Internet, and apolitical, 'neutral' understandings of 'information access' and 'information retrieval.' Information studies, long holding to positivist notions of the 'neutrality' of information, is stuck in a 'one-dimensionalist' paradigm where 'access to information' is linked to uncritical, centrist tropes such as 'democracy' and 'freedom of information.' Information access, moreover, is taken to be a universal 'good,' without a critical understanding of this concept. Marcuse presents a challenge to information studies, helping to question its grounding in instrumental rationality. Freeing the concept of information from its roots in scientific modernism and technological rationality helps to capture its larger affective, process-oriented, critical meaning.

Having 'more' information is not necessarily good, but being able to critically evaluate information, and contextualize techno-rationalist discourses of information in processes of capitalist expansion and neo-liberalism will make information studies a more 'critical' discipline. Marcuse's vision, though scathing in its critique of technological society, offers hope in the dialectical process, as it 'involves consciousness: recognition and seizure of the liberating potentialities' (Marcuse, 1964, p. 222). Marcuse's work pre-dated the Internet, and the Internet, despite an increasing commercial presence, still offers the possibility of enhancing democratic politics and serving as a liberatory, counter-hegemonic space. Much work has to be done, however, but Marcuse's vision can help information studies embrace the notion of a critical theory of information, in which centrist, liberal tropes like 'democracy' take on a more radical and meaningful character.

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