Troubling “Information Inequality”: Critical Reflections on Library and Information Professionals and Global Aid Work

Dave Hudson
Assistant Librarian
McLaughlin Library, University of Guelph
davidjameshudson@gmail.com

Abstract
Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals have demonstrated sincere concern with the widespread dispossession that characterizes the global landscape. Though the technical details and practices of LIS responses to such injustice vary, the prevailing understanding is that we, as LIS professionals, can best contribute to ending global inequality by addressing what has come to be known as “information inequality” – that is, the lack of access to information amongst suffering populations. This paper casts a critical eye on the assumptions underlying the concept of “information inequality”, advocating a deeper engagement with questions of language, position, and power in our global aid interventions.

Introduction: LIS Action on Global Injustice
There seems to be no shortage of genuinely expressed concern within the Library and Information Science (LIS) community about contributing to a more just, equitable world. For many, a professional commitment to enabling universal information access extends beyond conventional workplaces, encompassing a recognition, through dialogues and practical initiatives alike, that suffering and stark inequalities at a global scale are intimately connected to discrepancies in information use; and that LIS professionals – scholars and practitioners alike – have a duty to do what they can to respond. Examples of active interventions on the basis of such concern abound: from book donation projects to library building initiatives to global literacy programs to the increasingly prevalent positioning of information and communications technology (ICT) as a central means of improving majority world lives, LIS professionals seem not only to care, but to be interested in undertaking proactive work towards a positive difference.
And yet despite the unquestionably genuine altruism underlying such commitments, there is something that troubles me about global aid efforts within LIS. It is a dilemma that relates less to the technical ins and outs, or indeed the failures and successes, of any specific initiative, campaign, or organization, and more to the broad approaches that we in LIS have adopted and their profound historical consequences. My reflection on these troubles, then, proceeds from an examination of the largely unquestioned premises that pervade global-facing LIS work – that is, the sets of assumptions we draw on, consciously or not, in identifying and describing the problems at hand, and formulating and sharing solutions.

Unpacking Global “Information Inequality”

LIS concern with global suffering has tended to be expressed centrally through the concept of “information inequality.” We live, we are told, in a “knowledge society,” an era defined by an information “explosion”: advancements in technology, particularly ICT, have facilitated information flows in all realms of life, transforming the world around us into an interconnected “global village.” This eased exchange of knowledge has, it is in turn argued, enabled the mutual understanding and collaboration that are crucial to addressing common problems, working towards shared goals, and generally improving living standards.

What seems also to be commonly understood, however, is that such developments have not been shared equally on the global stage: while some countries are seen to have made great strides with the advent of the “knowledge” society, traditionally marginalized countries, it is argued, have not had access to these gains. Framed variously through phrases such as “information inequality,” the “knowledge gap,” “information poverty,” and the “digital divide,” there is much discussion within LIS of a global gap in access to information systems; and a subsequent gap in access to the wealth of diverse knowledge shared through such systems. Since information is understood, in the words of Librarians Without Borders, to be “vital in supporting learning and literacy, reducing poverty, empowering citizens, and building healthy, strong communities,”2 “information inequality” is understood to both result from and further worsen existing global schisms. The understanding, in turn, is that those of us in LIS who wish to see an end to such inequality must dedicate our efforts to ensuring that the “information divide” is bridged.

The intentions and sense of urgency that drive such discussions are certainly worth retaining. But while important, intentions and urgency are not enough. I’d suggest that those of us who are genuinely interested in addressing global suffering and dispossession from within our profession would do well to turn a critical eye to the
fundamental premises upon which our global “information inequality” discussions are built, scrutinizing our conversations, in particular, for those assumptions surrounding information, injustice, and suffering that circulate as seemingly self-evident truths. As writers such as noted anthropologist Arturo Escobar and physicist Vandana Shiva (among others) have suggested in relation to “development” definitions of poverty, the failure to undertake such critical self-scrutiny has far too often worked to severely compromise, if not nullify, our best intentions.

Upon what definitions of “information” do we draw, for example, in our ever-present talk of the “information society” and our identification of “information access” as central to the improvement of lives in the majority world? With what assumptions and through what measures do we identify the presence or absence of “information” in the communities that we seek to help? Which knowledges and traditions are being valued and which ignored in the identification of a “knowledge gap” between the minority and majority worlds, in efforts, indeed, aimed at “[t]aking knowledge to the poorest,” to cite the title of an earnest piece in the journal Nature? To what is “technology” understood to refer where the “assimilation of scientific and technological information” is identified as “an essential precondition for progress in developing countries”? And what indigenous technological processes, systems, and histories are obscured in the course of such conversations? What, in turn, are the consequences of these assumptions and uninterrogated concepts where our range of conceivable responses and roles is concerned? To what extent, in sum, are we in LIS prepared to think critically about the terms and histories associated with our global aid desires and efforts?

For all our genuine concern with informed solutions and much-touted expertise in information access and evaluation, however, there is little evidence of such critical self-reflection within the LIS community. The prevailing presumption, rather, is that global “information inequality” is a problem of absent information in the majority world, or, in one LIS writer’s explicit terms, “a glut of information in developed countries [and] a dearth in developing countries.” In spite of the crucial role that indigenous knowledges and technologies have historically played in so many aspects the West’s so-called “progress,” LIS discussions of “information societies” and “information inequality” all too often proceed as if non-Western knowledges and information systems simply don’t exist, as if the only legitimate information practices and systems are those that are imported from the West.

Where LIS discussions do recognize the existence of non-Western knowledges, such knowledges tend only to be treated as legitimate contributions to the problem of global inequality where they are mediated by Western technological and institutional models. One pair of authors argue, for instance, that we need to support the dissemination of
local majority world knowledge, but only register such knowledge as productive where it conforms to and circulates within Western publication systems. Another group of authors champions the contributions of indigenous culture, yet only seems able to conceive of its worth as a collection of static objects to be preserved within Western institutional settings (in this case, digital libraries) and to be consumed by Western audiences: “the developed world,” the authors write, “assumes the role of catalyst, midwife and consumer, for once indigenous culture has been recorded it will find a fascinated, sympathetic and, perhaps, influential audience in the developed world.” The prevailing (if perhaps unintended) suggestion, in turn, is that, for all intents and purposes, indigenous information systems and practices do not exist: without Western intervention, majority world knowledges, information systems, and technologies are quite literally nothing to speak of.

As much through omission as through explicit suggestion, then, the logic that emerges within LIS discussions of information and global inequality is that majority world communities suffer because they simply don’t have the knowledge and technological innovation required for “progress,” because they have yet to “catch up” to the benefits of the “information revolution” – because, in a word, they are “backward.” To so many of us whose ancestors and living relations have historically been dispossessed by Western interventions in the name of freedom and progress, the positive intentions behind such discussions are overshadowed by the stereotypes of “dark continents” and “primitiveness” that have long informed claims of our cultural inferiority.

Perhaps more significantly, the uncritical assumption that majority world suffering is a function of such communities’ failure to enter the “information era” precludes a more critical inquiry into the broader causes and dynamics of global dispossession. Of course, it’s hard to deny that communication, understanding, and information sharing between communities is vital in any current work towards a better world. But uncritical LIS discussions of global “information inequality” rarely offer consideration of the ongoing histories that have shaped both the global suffering we wish to address and the solutions touted by the minority world. Even the most cursory venture into the history of Western intervention reveals a clear pattern in which majority world communities have been forcibly dispossessed in the interests of Western resource extraction and industrialization. In a critique of The End of Poverty author Jeffrey Sachs’s contention that “The Industrial Revolution led to new riches, but much of the world was left far behind,” Shiva observes that

[the poor are not those who have been ‘left behind’; they are the ones who have been robbed. The riches accumulated by Europe are based on riches taken from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Without the destruction of India’s rich textile industry, without the takeover of the spice trade,
without the genocide of the native American tribes, without Africa’s slavery, the Industrial Revolution would not have led to new riches for Europe or the US. It was this violent takeover of Third World resources and markets that created wealth in the North and poverty in the South.9

Likewise, I would suggest that global injustice is not simply – or even centrally – a matter of absent information, technologies, and communication systems in the majority world. Indeed, if we acknowledge such histories of economic exploitation, it is well worth asking what particular interests are served where our sole response to the majority world’s dispossession is identified in the information systems and resources produced by the West – where that which we offer as a solution also happens to be that which our new “knowledge economy” happens to be selling. Likewise, we might also well inquire into the origins of the raw materials and labour that fuel this economy, as well as the destination for the electronic waste produced by our culture of constant “upgrade.”

Effective LIS responses to the problem of global inequality, then, cannot merely be predicated on “putting information in the hands of the world,” to cite a phrase used by Librarians Without Borders10 – particularly where our definition of information practices and systems includes only those traditionally encompassed by LIS and exported from the West. The continuation of majority world dispossession may well be a matter of missing information, but the body of assumptions that we in LIS bring to our work on global inequality is, I submit, chief among that which needs to be further informed. Indeed, the critical consideration of history that I’m suggesting we’d do well to undertake must include a sincere understanding of the history of Western efforts to “help”: as numerous writers have noted, the emergence of publicly-stated Western concern with humanitarian intervention (particularly European campaigns against slavery in Africa in the late 1800s) was predicated on the portrayal of the majority world as dark, backward, uncivilized, on the profound and violent dishonouring of the nuances, sophistication, and knowledges of indigenous communities.11 The attitude was that “the ‘advanced’ nations [take] responsibility for those ‘peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world’, putting the latter officially under the tutelage of the industrial nations ‘as a sacred trust of civilization.’”12 If we in LIS continue to approach questions of global dispossession using the limited definitions of “information” and “technology” that have characterized “information inequality” discussions, then we not only extend such degrading portrayals of the very communities we seek to help, but also limit the very range of solutions imaginable.
Epilogue: Broadening Understanding, Broadening Capacity

Such areas of reflection offer many lessons, then, for those of us in the LIS community who wish to contribute to challenges against global injustice. And I have no doubt that we sincerely do wish to help. Indeed, at its core, library and information work is a practice of helping, a matter of positioning oneself as a facilitator within the lives of others. And there appears to be no shortage of critical reflection on the histories, concepts, user identities, and philosophies that inform our work in less global-oriented professional contexts: we speak at length about the assumptions at play in reference interactions, collection development practices, web usability, and countless other aspects of LIS work. And in such professional self-reflection, we hold out the possibility that we might need to reconsider our previous assumptions on any given matter.

We’d do well, then, to allow our global aid work to be informed by these sorts of practices of interrogating our “helping” strategies. What forms and systems of knowledge exist, for example, outside of that which can be captured in the ones and zeros of digital libraries? What possibilities for collaboration and mutual understanding appear, likewise, where we, as library and information professionals, work to expand the idea of the knowledge commons beyond the borders of Western publication systems? These are broad questions, no doubt and ones to which I don’t profess to offer detailed answers. I would submit, however, that the path to such specifics lies in asking these sorts of pointed questions wherever we are moved to act upon genuine concern.

An intensified commitment to such critical self-reflection would allow us to examine the ways in which seemingly self-evident terms and romanticized frameworks – such as the “global village,” the “information society,” or “technological advancement” – obscure our complicity in the extension of histories by which the very communities whose suffering we wish to address are inferiorized, the realities and roots of their dispossession ignored, and the material injustices they face extended. Though the necessary research and frameworks to facilitate such self-examination exist (in the work of critical development scholars, among others), our commitment to the task is, to be sure, no easy undertaking: it involves confronting the profound problems underlying approaches that we have come to hold dear. But such critical self-reflection is nevertheless fundamentally about enhancing our capacity (rather than denying our capability) as actors in struggles against inequality: just as this paper is not intended as a dismissal of genuine effort, so too would an intensified commitment to such mindfulness within LIS be profoundly enabling, allowing us to ask a more inclusive set of questions in relation to the concepts and histories associated with our role in global assistance; and thus to consider a broader range of possible responses to the global injustice that concerns us so deeply.
Notes

1. The phrase “majority world” has come to be accepted as a means of referring, in the words of its originator, Shahidul Alam, to those “economically poor countries of the world” that have traditionally been categorized as being ‘Third World’ or ‘Developing World’ or even LDCs (Least Developed Countries). The expressions have strong negative connotations that reinforce the stereotypes about poor communities and represent them as icons of poverty. They hide their histories of oppression and continued exploitation [...] and hinder the appreciation of the cultural and social wealth of these communities.

Alam coined the phrase as a way of pointing to “the fact that we are indeed the majority of humankind. It also brings sharp attention to the anomaly that the Group of 8 countries – whose decisions affect the majority of the world’s people – represent a tiny fraction of humankind [...] It also defines the community in terms of what it has, rather than what it lacks.” For this reason, I have chosen to use the phrase, as well as its counterpart, “minority world,” throughout this paper. See Shahidul Alam, “Majority World: Challenging the West’s Rhetoric of Democracy,” *Amerasia Journal* 34, no. 1 (2008): 89.


7. Chan and Costa, “Participation in the Global Knowledge Commons.”


Bibliography


