Conceptions of 'Information Poverty' in LIS:
An Analysis of Discourses

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Abstract

Notions of 'information poverty' and the 'information poor' in LIS are examined from a discourse analytical perspective. Foucault's understanding of discourse, as forming the social reality to which it refers, is outlined and the related concept of the *statement*, as the basic element of discourse, is introduced. 'Information poverty' is examined as a *statement* in its relation to other *statements* in order to highlight assumptions and factors contributing to its construction. The analysis is based on close reading of 35 articles published in LIS journals between 1995 and 2005. Four groups of especially productive discursive procedures and themes are identified and discussed: 1. economic determinism, 2. technological determinism and the 'information society', 3. historicising the 'information poor', 4. the library profession's moral obligation and responsibility.

Introduction

'Information Poverty' and with it the category of the 'information poor' as a concept in Library and Information Science (LIS) can be traced back at least as far as the 1970s. More recently it emerged as an integral element of the information society debates and frequently appears paired with references to ICTs and allusions of the digital divide. It has come to subsume a curious mix of groups, all of which are primarily thought of as

afflicted by other forms of deprivation or deficiency, and which are constructed on the basis of this "lack". Among them are rural people, the working class, elderly women, the unemployed, the handicapped, the homeless, ethnic minorities, and most prominently developing countries - either individually or imagined as a homogeneous category.

By pairing *information* with *poverty*, the concept of information becomes one that implies the possibility of scarcity and leads to a commodified character of information as an alienable good. Furthermore, by characterising distinct groups of individuals, organisations or even countries by their perceived lack of information, the underlying assumption has to be that there is a "right kind" of information. It can be argued that existence and nature, as well as position of this type of information are determined, produced and maintained from a privileged position, i.e. by systems of authoritative institutional discourses.

Based on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, the aim of this paper is to critically assess the notion of 'information poverty' as it emerged more recently in LIS and to examine how it results in the objectification of the 'information poor' as a group, which is then subject to intervention. It is intended to shed light on concepts, interests and strategies leading to this construction, and thus to challenge some of the underlying assumptions.

Constructedness and constructiveness of "poverty" itself as a *problematization* has been described very pertinently by Escobar (1995). He argues that as an organising concept poverty came to define the construction of the third world and with it of an entire *discursive formation* based on notions of development. This led to the creation of new discourses and practices shaping *"the reality to which they referred"* (Escobar 1995, p.24). He shows how, as a result, the solutions began to appear self-evident and the necessary tools - posited as neutral and universal devices - developed into seemingly obvious, quasi-natural parts of the solution. In a situation of unequal relations development discourse arose from economic theory since the 1940s and by the 1970s it had *"achieved the status of certainty in the social imaginary"* (Escobar 1995, p.5).

The function of 'information poverty' as a category within this very development dis-

course has been pointed out by Wilson (2003) in the course of an analysis of international public ICT debates. She found its construction to be largely dominated by technological determinism as well as by teleological models of development. Furthermore, Wilson (2003) shows that the dichotomy between the so-called developed and developing world is carried over into the ICT discourse and subsequently extended to contribute to the construction of the 'information poor' in this context.

The existence of what can be described as a professional caste is frequently instrumental for, but also the result of, such a development. This insofar as it guarantees the development and application of institutionally sanctioned expert knowledge and thus controls production as well as productiveness of discourse. This investigation of the notion of 'information poverty' within the realm of LIS can be understood as an assessment of its role as a constitutive element of such a productive professional discourse.

Foucault's Notion of Discourse

Starting from a Foucauldian notion of discourse, it is believed that an assessment of 'information poverty' can be achieved by positioning it as a distinct concept or, to use Foucault's term, as a *statement* and by weighing it up in its relation to other *statements* within, as well as outside of the area of LIS.

As a theoretical framework this has certain implications. Therefore, prior to embarking on the investigation of the notion of 'information poverty' itself, it is necessary to briefly outline what a Foucauldian notion of discourse implies, as well as to define the related concept of the *statement* in this context. In the course, this clarification of the theoretical assumptions and terminological "tools" will give way to a more precise delimitation of this paper's restricted scope.

On a very prosaic level discourse refers to 'what has been said'. Yet, discourses are more than simply groups of linguistic signs. They are productive, in the sense that as practices they *"systematically form the objects of which they speak"* (Foucault 1972a, p.49). Through discourses social realities are formed. Furthermore, discourse is seen as adhering to strict sets of rules and notably also as lacking agency. This lack of agency is contested and, together with Foucault's refusal to talk in terms of ideology, it has routinely been criticised as precluding critical political analysis or intervention. However, as will

be suggested later, Foucault's understanding of power and its relation to discourse can be interpreted as addressing this issue.

Discourses should neither be seen as a monolithic entities, nor, akin to language, as systems offering endless possibilities for combination. Rather they consist of limited numbers of so-called *statements*, which relate to each other in shifting, yet clearly regulated ways. More precisely, these statements are concepts, whose existence is based on reasons as well as conditions that are accounted for by the rules of the discourse which they form part of. Thus a statement is the basic element of the discourse, which in turn provides the rules that determine the identity of the statement. Foucault (1972a) outlines two sets of procedures and characteristics, through which this identity is achieved. These can roughly be summarised as internal conditions and external limits. Whereas some of these procedures are particularly relevant in the context of the present study and need to be considered in more detail. Among the first set, a statement's materiality is its most significant constitutive characteristic. In other words, a statement must have been realised and have a substance. Also, it must have been pronounced from a certain place, a certain position and at a particular time. Significantly this place of enunciation is positioned at an institutional level. The second group of limits are those imposed by surrounding statements or neighbouring concepts. It is important to consider that a statement's position is neither fixed nor absolute. Rather, they exist in systems of dispersion, in their relations to other statements, and these relations determine how and by which rules they can be employed and also in which formations they can appear. This contributes to the statements' stabilisation, as a consequence of which they become repeatable. Whereas being repeatable is the statements' fundamental characteristic that renders them at all recognisable as such.

Having established the statement as the basic element of discourse, which in turn determines the rules, does however not make the statement constitutive of discourse. Rather, statement and discourse should be understood as constitutive of each other or as correlative. Whereas statements and their dispersion belong to a discourse, yet at the same time *"the regularity of the statement is defined by the discursive formation itself"* (Foucault 1972a, p.117).

Three sets of procedures regulate production, control, and organisation of discourse in

society. Externally these are rules of exclusion, namely the taboo, the division into reason and madness, and the division between true and false. A second set of procedures, consisting of the commentary, the author, and disciplines, guarantees the internal delimitation. Finally, discourse is understood as controlled by an additional group of rules, which "*relate to the conditions under which it may be deployed*" (Foucault 1972b, p. 224). These restrictions are implied in verbal rituals, in "*the fellowships of discourse*" (Foucault 1972b, p.225), in doctrines, and in social appropriation. Put simply, these rules determine who can utter *truth*, in which manner, under which conditions, in which capacity, and from which position.

Furthermore, Foucault's conception of power contributes significantly to his concept of discourse and especially to its analysis. In particular in his later writings, it is a central element and can be said to address the above mentioned lack of agency (e.g. Howarth 2001). In short, power is not perceived as a force, which is in the possession of an individual or a group and which is used to dominate the other. Rather it is understood as a non-localised and crucially as a productive function that traverses and circulates in a "*net-like organisation*" (Foucault 1980, p.98). In this sense discourse has to be regarded as a result of the productivity of power, while inversely the examination of discourse enables the analysis of "*the related effects of power*" (Foucault 1980, p.71).

Closely related to this view of power is Foucault's understanding of knowledge. Knowledge and power are seen as interwoven and interdependent, one constitutive of the other. More precisely, the production of instruments for development, measurement, collection and distribution of knowledge are seen as constitutive of power, while at the same time organisation and circulation of these "*apparatuses of knowledge*" (Foucault 1980, p.102) are the effect of power. In this sense, expert knowledge can be understood as a form of knowledge that functions as a system of control and which results from thus produced instruments and apparatuses from specific institutionally privileged positions.

The outlined reading of discourse - i.e. a productive, socially constructed regime of knowledge and truth - provides the backdrop for the subsequent analysis. Thus, as a discipline LIS is assigned the role of an internal delimitator of discourse. Put differently, it contains, provides and controls the rules for the production of discourse, i.e. for formation and dispersion of statements. Yet, while retaining the outlined conceptualisation of

discourse, the study departs from Foucault's "method" insofar as its starting point is not the discourse or even discourses in the plural. Rather it is an attempt to mobilise the concept of the *statement*. This is envisioned as tying into and drawing on, what can be called, various fields of use, or even quite distinct and readily identifiable external discourses, which lend it significance and thus contribute to its construction. However, this paper does not concentrate on the examination of an 'information poverty discourse', but on role and alliances of 'information poverty' as a statement within a disciplinary, professional LIS discourse. In particular the focus is on discursive procedures that are the result of these various alliances and connections, and the themes that lead to its formation and stabilisation.

Material Selection & Research Design

The study is based on repeated close reading of 35 English language articles, published in LIS journals between 1995 and 2005. These were selected either because they deal directly with 'information poverty' or the 'information poor', or because they refer to and employ the notion as an established concept. The selection was found to be representative of the relevant, available English language literature during this period. Despite the inclusion of research as well as professional journals, the majority of the articles were found to be written from a professional perspective, i.e. professional librarianship. This particular time frame was chosen, since during that period the importance of the Internet and especially the World Wide Web has increased considerably. This has lead to uncertainties and changes within the field, which had and have a strong impact on the concept of 'information poverty'. To frame the analysis, a conference report from 1975 and a conference paper from 1986 were drawn upon.

The selection is geographically biased and most of the included articles originate in English speaking countries, albeit on all continents. To supplement and broaden the perspective additional material in other formats and languages1 has been read cursorily, alongside a variety of documents - i.e. policy papers, working group reports, and meeting records - available from the IFLA website (IFLA 2005). These additional materials were published within that same time frame as well as prior to that date. They were not directly included in the analysis, yet they helped to contextualise it by contributing to a better understanding of the relevant issues surrounding the concept.

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1   German and French

Discursive Procedures: Alliances, Themes and Points of Connection

According to a report from the meeting of ASIS, the American Society for Information Science, in 1975 the then chairman Edwin Parker called for the introduction of a "*concrete information policy – aimed at equitable distribution of resources within society*". This had become necessary since in his view "*the individual [was] fighting a loosing battle for equal information access because corporations and government can assert the same access rights*". Therefore, the report continues, "*what is needed, he suggested, is [...] a major remodelling of institutional structures aimed at lowering costs and improving access to the 'information poor' (including libraries) as well as 'the information rich'.*" [1, p.2304].

Several things are of interest in this brief account. Firstly, the suggested information policy's stated goal is not equitable distribution of 'information' or even equitable distribution of 'access to information' in society, but equitable distribution of *resources* in general. Secondly, the line between 'information rich' and 'information poor' is drawn between the individual on one side and the corporation and the state on the other. The difference between the two is anchored in their unequal access, i.e. the poor/individual being overpowered in the fight for access by the rich/state/corporation. Thirdly however, improvements should benefit both groups. Moreover, these changes hinge on structural changes within the institution. Finally, libraries are counted among those that can be 'information poor', thus forging an alliance between the individual seen as fighting the battle for access and the institution of the library.

The ASIS meeting in 1986 included an entire paper on "*Informational Poverty*" [2]. Here "*informational poverty*" is posited as a *natural* element of modern life, which is strongly associated with an excess, a "*sea of information*" on the one hand and censorship and control on the other, and as an all encompassing concept that affects every society, in which individual members are not in a position to know everything that is knowable. It starts out by claiming:

> *Of the challenges facing an information society, the problem of informational poverty is taking on major dimensions.*

[2, p.69],

and concludes:

*Informational poverty is not simply a malady of the eco-
nomic poor or the politically disenfranchised. It effects us
all. As a societal pathology of our modern times, its cure
lies in improved information management, the establish-
ment of information utilities staffed by competent, know-
ledgeable professionals and intelligent systems dedicated
to service and an understanding of the important role of
information in the evolution and continued existence of
human society.*
[2, p.73].

The account is pervaded by a sense of cultural pessimism and relies heavily on medical metaphors. *Informational poverty* is posited as a disease specific to the *information so-ciety* - the existence of which is presupposed - and which literally infects the very fabric of this society. Since disease exists in opposition to health only and as a deviance from a 'normal' state, the possibility of *healthier* societies must be assumed. Relating the *mal-ady* to *our modern times* implies that it did not exist in previous times. However, the solution is not to be found in those earlier, healthier times, but rather in developments, *cures,* originating within this very *information society* and they can be *managed* with new technologies and other devices, and the *establishment of utilities* first, which are then *staffed by professionals*, who are *competent and knowledgeable.* The nature and extent of their competence and knowledge remain unexplained, while the job of provid-ing a *service* is that of *systems.* Put differently, 'information poverty' is constructed as a syndrome that originates within the very nature of an information society, i.e. an excess of information. Since a return to a more innocent, more complete state is precluded, the *disease* has to be managed by handing over control to experts and machines.

The numerous connections between 'information poverty' and various other statements drawn in these two different accounts establish a number of themes that contribute to the formation of the notion. To reiterate the most prominent points: 'Information poverty' is associated with a particular type of contemporary society. It is developing into a problem, which threatens the equality within society, or has already established it-

self as such and it lies with society and the profession to address the problem by introducing specific institutional changes or by providing systems, tools and techniques as well as the experts to use and apply them.

It will be interesting to return to the themes and associations identified here, after a closer analysis of more recent accounts. This will allow us to see how they have transformed, extended, stabilised or disappeared and also how different ones have emerged during the past ten years.

Discursive Procedures and Themes

Among the multitude of thematic strands and conceptual ties that form the notion of the 'information poor' in the LIS literature four particularly dominant groups of recurring discursive procedures and often strongly interwoven themes were identified. However, this is not intended to be an exhaustive list or to provide a complete picture. Instead, also due to the restricted space of this paper, it seems sensible to concentrate on the most assertive and productive themes.

Economic determinism

A number of powerful dichotomies contribute to the construction of the 'information poor', among them urban/rural, western/indigenous, developed/developing, literate/ illiterate. However, the most assertive pair, which is also directly inscribed in the term, is the opposition between economically rich and poor. A direct link is made between economic deprivation and information poverty, whereas information itself is often positioned either akin to a natural resource or as a direct result of monetary wealth. Consider the following excerpt from an article about Nigerian rural libraries:

> *It is a well-known fact that information is at the heart of development. Consequently, the information and resource rich societies of the west have developed at an incredible rate in comparison to the poor countries of the south which are wallowing in abject poverty and debt.*
> [3, p.30]

Information is aligned with other *resources* and seen as occurring independently. Since

it also pre-dates development, cause and effect are merged into one and the '*poor countries of the south'* are all but thrown into a vicious circle. The notion of information, mostly identified with western science, as a motor for economic development is an established image in development discourse, and the measurement of development by the yardstick of European science is directly linked with it. As in the above account, these '*information rich societies of the west'* are seen to define the aims and to set the pace, with which the others have to catch up (see Escobar 1995).

This direct alignment of information and monetary wealth is by no means limited to accounts of the 'developing world'. It lies at the very heart of the notion 'information poverty' and a sense of economic determinism or economicist rhetoric pervades the concept and all its associations.

Technological determinism and the 'information society'
One of the most dominant recurring themes is rooted in a technologically deterministic view of an 'information society', whose emergence and existence is primarily dependent on the Internet. Consequently, lack of (affordable) access to the Internet, leads to an exclusion from this society and is thus interpreted as a state of deprivation, which is characterised as 'information poverty'. Furthermore, since here growth of the Internet is associated or even equated with an information increase, this is perceived as leading to growing numbers of 'information poor'. The following excerpt from 2003 is an illustrative example:

> *Of all our enemies, poverty has hindered us the most in*
> *our efforts to use the Internet optimally. Since we are poor,*
> *we cannot get easy access to the Internet. Inversely, not*
> *using the Internet can only widen the gap between the 'in-*
> *formation rich' and the 'information poor'.*
> [4, p.100]

Moreover, since the problem is merely one of access, the solution is already implied in the cause and lies in providing the technology, albeit usually alongside IT or (information) literacy training.

Based on an equation of information with codification, illiteracy is often construed as

the determining characteristic of the 'information poor' and consequently a society's 'informational wealth' can be established by measuring literacy rates. Taking the equation further leads to an association of 'information poverty' via illiteracy with a lack of computer access:

> *The gap between information rich and information poor,*
> *and literate and illiterate can be reduced by setting up*
> *community information centers. These centers are to be*
> *equipped with multimedia PCs and relevant software to*
> *enable even those who are illiterate to use computers us-*
> *ing icons and the mouse.*
> [5, p.37]

A variation of this theme lies in the association of 'information poverty' with 'information overload', which is also posited as a characteristic of an Internet dominated 'information society'. Especially, since recently mere access is often not perceived as posing a problem any longer, this argument has gained currency. Here, in an inversion of the scarcity argument, 'information poverty' is associated with a technically induced information surplus, which precludes sense-making for those perceived as lacking the right tools or skills.

Historicising the 'information poor' – Invoking the roots of the (public) library
The emergence of the Internet and the growing importance of ICTs in general have contributed to considerable insecurities concerning the nature of the library and to uncertainties about its future role. The construction of the 'information poor' based on the effects these changes have meant for the institution of the library is frequently achieved by invoking the historical purpose of the public library and the situation at the time it was founded in the 19th century. By likening the industrial revolution to the contemporary changes, the 'information poor' are associated with the proletarian poor of the 19th century and their emergence appears as an obvious, almost inevitable event. Thus, the 'information poor' become a *"traditional responsibility"* [6, p.28] of the public library and in turn role and purpose of the institution are stabilised.

The profession's responsibility and moral obligation

An especially productive discursive procedure emerges through the association of 'information poverty' with political or moral concerns already entangled with strong images of suffering and suppression. A sense of ethical concern and righteousness is constructed upon which the library profession's moral obligation is based to help groups of however imagined 'information poor'. This is most pertinent in compounds such as the "*information starved*" or "*information apartheid*", but pervades most accounts and is of course reflected in the coinage of the term 'information poverty' itself.

A clear connection exists between the conceived needs of the 'information poor' and the profession's possibilities of alleviating the thus established deficiency, which is usually expressed in various forms of illiteracy or as a technological inadequacy. An excerpt from an article based on a talk given in 1997 about the role of the public library in an 'information society' illustrates this tie between the 'information poor' and the profession's role. It is also a good example of the almost missionary tone that pervades many of the accounts:

> *Surely it is up to us here today, the committed professional [...] to ensure that the Information Society does not lead to exclusion, adding to the divisions, including those of information rich and information poor, that exist in our society. Don't we have a role in creating a society in which the computer illiterate and the non connected are not left on the margins? [...] There are many steps we can and should be taking to ensure that not only our traditional users are part of this information world, but that we stretch out and reach others. We need policies for education and training – of ourselves and our users [...].*
> [7, p.2]

In a clear assertion of the profession's specialist status, the 'information poor' are created in a way that automatically assigns their *salvation* to the library and its staff. The solution lies in outlining *policies*, in providing as well as in receiving *education* and *training*. Notably, this training has to be provided to the librarians as well as to their clients.

A similar chord is struck in the following excerpt dating from 2000:

> *LIS departments are generally found in universities, and*
> *university graduates often dread working with the poor,*
> *the illiterate, and in rural areas. [...] We must provide stu-*
> *dents with the knowledge that inculcates a service culture.*
> *Libraries can help empower the information poor in tack-*
> *ling their challenges and responsibilities. Graduates must*
> *understand their responsibility in transforming the inform-*
> *ation poor into information consumers [...].*
> [8, p.30]

Again, the construction of the 'information poor' is directly relatable to the responsibility of the profession and what's more to its education. Therefore, as an obvious consequence the solution to the thus created *problem* has to lie with the profession. Whereas in line with the already identified economicist rhetoric, that is associated with the concept as a whole, the 'information poor', here identified as the illiterate, the poor and rural people, have to be turned into *consumers*.

The construction of the 'information poor' in a way that, almost by default, assigns their rescue to the library profession, and be it solely by raising awareness about their status as 'information poor' in the first place, is achieved in very homogeneous ways throughout the literature. Yet, the desired outcomes of the different recommended interventions' – either access provision, literacy education, or other forms of training – appear to be less consistent. However, frequently they are posited as noble and worthy causes, e.g. fighting censorship, strengthening democracy and civil rights, or as above, creating consumers. Often this is explicitly posited as amending injustices and inequalities and consistently the librarian's role is portrayed as that of the *natural* ally of those that are seen as 'weak'. Thus, the construction of the 'information poor', as it occurs in these accounts, can be interpreted as serving a strategic purpose aimed at strengthening the profession's role and image and alleviating its status.

Conclusion

If we return to the two accounts from 1975 and 1986 that were briefly discussed above, the emergence and relative stability of the concept appears more clearly. The technological determinism, which is already present in the two earlier papers, continues to be influential in the recent literature through the association of 'information poverty' with an ICT dominated 'information society'. Interestingly the recourse to the library's historical and traditional roles and values develops as a thematic strand. An explanation for the latter, it has been argued, can be found in the perception of an increased insecurity about the institution's future role. The pervading sense of cultural pessimism associated with a disintegrating society found in the 1986 paper on '*informational poverty*' has given way to more subdued accounts – utopian as well as dystopian - of a globalised 'information society'. Yet the association of 'information poverty' with a surplus of information has persisted and more recently increased in significance. Most notable however are the strong and persistent discursive procedures that tie 'information poverty' to institution and profession, and thus contribute to the construction of the 'information poor' as a group who are the librarian's responsibility and quasi-natural objects of intervention. More specifically, it can be argued that the 'information poor' emerge as a homogeneous category in LIS as the product of the professional and institutional discourse by constructing them as the traditional, obvious and natural target of the professional practice.

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