

# Information Privilege: Considerations for Library and Information Science Curriculum Design

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## ABSTRACT

Embedded within the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education and building on the broader concepts of privilege and oppression, information privilege (IP) might be a useful lens for centering library and information science (LIS) curricula on information-related aspects of social power. IP suggests that individuals' access to and utilization of information is connected to demographic factors like socioeconomic status, place of birth, and gender. Despite the relevance of this concept to LIS scholarship and teaching, LIS scholarly discussions on information privilege are limited. The limited existing literature mainly extends Booth's foundational essay exploring IP through the lens of institutional affiliation, stopping short of fuller sociocultural considerations. This essay considers IP as an information-focused organizing perspective within LIS teaching and curriculum development. The authors conclude with suggestions for building discussions of IP into LIS curriculum and teaching.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Information literacy; curriculum; pedagogy; critical librarianship; social justice.

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

privilege; information privilege; information access; teaching; lis curricula.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2024.1782>

## **INTRODUCTION**

Embedded within the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (ACRL, 2015) and building on the concepts of social privilege and oppression, we consider information privilege (IP) as a potentially useful lens for focusing library and information science (LIS) discussions of privilege on information-related aspects of social power and oppression. IP is closely tied to information access, a concept that is threaded throughout much of the ACRL Framework. Despite the acknowledged importance and legal endorsements of equitable information access, its realization can be limited by diverse social statuses, which may either confer advantages or impose disadvantages on individuals. The entitled access and use of information is called “information privilege.”

The goals of this essay are: 1) to provide a deeper understanding of IP, which is referenced in the ACRL framework but not explained in further detail; and 2) to propose IP as possible a core value of LIS education that can complement existing LIS scholarship on privilege and related concepts while highlighting the role of information as central to LIS education and practice.

### **Information Privilege in the Acrl Framework**

The ACRL framework creates a structured guideline providing key information literacy principles, goals, and strategies. The six “frames” that comprise it include: 1) authority is constructed and contextual, 2) information creation as a process, 3) information has value, 4) research as inquiry, 5) scholarship as conversation, and 6) searching as strategic exploration. We recognize that information access is just one of many core aspects of library services. But without equitable information access, none of these frames can be realistically achieved.

The ACRL Framework explicitly addresses information privilege within the third frame, "Information has value." The final disposition in this frame emphasizes information literate learners' inclination to self-reflect on their own information privilege: “Learners who are developing their information literate abilities... are inclined to examine their own information privilege” (p. 17). There is no definition of IP offered, but there is reference to the concepts of marginalization and organizational power dynamics as underlying effective information value:

“[information] value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices. However, value may also be leveraged by individuals and organizations to effect change and for civic, economic, social, or personal gains.” (p. 16)

We argue that information privilege hinges on the foundation of information access, enabling people and groups to “wield” information effectively. Recognized as a fundamental human right by the United Nations in 1948, the significance of information access has been underscored by legal professionals who contend that it serves as a cornerstone upon which other rights rely (Sanders, 2013). This definition and argument posit information access as a crucial prerequisite for active individual engagement and participatory citizenship within a democratic society.

### **Privilege in the Social Sciences**

Of course, there can be no concept of information privilege without an umbrella concept of privilege. The notion of privilege has deep scholarly roots in the humanities and social sciences, from W. E. B. Du Bois's (1935) examination of the "psychological wage" that allows poor Whites to perceive themselves as superior to poor Blacks, to McIntosh's (1992) exploration of White privilege and male privilege – which in itself has been critiqued as posturing for its focus on confessions of privilege rather than meaningful antiracist actions (e.g., Lensmire et al., 2013) -- and beyond. Scholarship across disciplines has converged to define privilege as an advantage granted to individuals based on socially-determined factors like race and gender, rather than personal achievement. Many scholars further argue that those who enjoy privilege often remain unaware of it, mistakenly attributing their success solely to their own efforts and abilities. Our understanding of privilege in the LIS educational context is shaped by this extensive scholarship in the social sciences (Black & Stone, 2005; Lucal, 1996).

We position this essay in line with Black and Stone's (2005) broad conceptualization of privilege, placing it within the context of oppression, and offering an expanded view of key factors beyond just race and gender to include sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, differing degrees of ableness, and religious affiliation. Black and Stone further note the difference between "privilege" and "preferred status." They posit privilege as any entitlement, sanction, power, advantage, or right granted to a person or group solely based on birthright membership, and preferred status as the socially-constructed fondness, predilection, or inclination toward a favored group. This distinction gives us a clearer understanding of social power as a defining component of both privilege and the derivative concept of IP.

### **Information Privilege in the Library and Information Science Literature**

One of the first discussions of IP within LIS is Booth's 2014 blog post "On Information Privilege" (Booth, 2014). She defines IP as the ability to access information, influenced and determined by one's status and positionality, encompassing factors such as class, race, gender, culture, sexuality, occupation, institutional affiliation, and political perspective.

Building on Booth's broad framing, the work of several theorists working outside of traditional LIS boundaries can position IP as a more fully formed framework for equitable information literacy education. Integrating feminist pedagogy (e.g. Shrewbury, 1993) aimed at exposing and challenging power-based learning, gender norms, and social hierarchies, with critical pedagogy (Freire, 1968), which strives to dismantle oppressive status quos, into IP can provide a lens to delve beneath our personal experiences and acknowledge challenges faced by marginalized and oppressed groups. IP contextualizes information literacy within the broader socio-cultural framework of equitable information access and social justice. It recognizes that information is fundamental for shaping individual and collective awareness and knowledge acquisition (Booth, 2014). Privileged access to information and information systems can come in many forms, and access can be impacted by several intersectional factors, such as access to technology, socioeconomic status, individual identity, or institutional affiliation (Duke University Libraries). Despite these realizations of unequal and inequitable access to information, the scope of academic inquiry about IP has been limited.

In one of the few existing studies of IP, Powell (2020) underscored the crucial need for integrating IP education into the higher education classroom. Through the implementation of a survey following a semester-long seminar course titled "Information Privilege," it became evident that first-year students lacked familiarity with the concept of IP and were unable to identify their own privileged positions. Consequently, Powell recommends incorporating IP into library teaching methodologies, drawing from models such as Information Privilege and Primary Sources (Zepada, 2018), or the Information Privilege and Open Access model (Young and Acosta, 2018).

Akin to Powell, Johnson and Smedley (2017) delved into the significance of the "Information has value" ACRL frame in comprehending information privilege. They advocate for firsthand experiences and reflection as the most effective means to teach the concept. Utilizing a community-based participatory research approach within the course "Soc 205," students collaborated with community members and the Immigration Justice Initiative to create information materials for community members navigating self-representative legal cases. Their involvement shed light on the limitation of providing only open access resources due to constraints on accessibility as a result of third-party sharing policies and the need to comply with the ethics of information sharing. Students gained insight into how restricted access to information could detrimentally impact the health and well-being of community members. The authors recommend an enhancement of library teaching to include a deeper understanding of the traditional publishing system and the open access movement, thereby fostering a more comprehensive knowledge base for students and community members alike.

In addition, several university libraries have built the concept of IP into their information literacy programs. Examples include City University of Seattle (St. Clair, 2023) and The University of Massachusetts Global library (2024). UMass Global provides an IP resource guide that explores various facets of IP, including its manifestations, impacts, and strategies for promoting information equity. Factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, education level, and geographical location are also highlighted as significant influencers of IP. Similarly, drawing on recent research by Hare and Evanson (2018) and Saunders (2017), which focus on access initiatives among undergraduates and the context of academic environments and paywalls, the UMass Global guide offers valuable insights on using IP to guide student information literacy development.

### **Anti-racism, classroom equity, critical race perspectives, social justice, and more: does lis need yet another way to frame privilege and oppression?**

We are not arguing that LIS should abandon the broader concept of privilege as core to understanding information needs and behaviors -- quite the opposite. We are suggesting that as a subset of the larger concept of privilege, IP gives LIS scholars and educators a clearer way to talk about information-related aspects of privilege. Conversations of IP must still be framed within broader conceptions of privilege.

We also note that there is a large and rich body of LIS scholarship on concepts that are closely related to IP, such as classroom equity (e.g. Rapchak, Hands, & Hensley, 2023), critical race perspectives (e.g. Chancellor et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2015), social justice

(e.g. Colón-Aguirre & Cooke, 2022; Cooke, Sweeney, & Noble, 2016; Mehra, 2021; Mehra, Rioux, & Albright, 2009; Winberry, 2021), and privilege (e.g. Singh, 2022). Each of these concepts adds important perspectives for bringing the social redress of historic oppression into classroom and community education. Why add still one more concept to this mix?

We see three possible advantages of framing LIS curricular development around IP as an LIS-specific subset of the broader social science concept of privilege. The first reason is fairly simple: the “information” part of IP highlights information as core to the LIS educational mission.

The second possible advantage is both more complicated and less certain. Might a focus on IP be a way for LIS curriculum development work to shift the focus of LIS classroom discussions of privilege away from privileged groups to information as affording privilege? As we see with some discussions of privilege, such as responses to McIntosh's (1992) discussion of White privilege and male privilege, discussions of privilege alone without qualification can unfortunately serve to reify the power of privileged group membership. In McIntosh's case, discussing “White” and “male” as examples of privilege even when done from a critical perspective still brings added attention to two privileged groups. IP might offer a way for LIS educators to maintain focus on libraries as means for increasing information access and inequity for marginalized and oppressed groups. Perhaps more curricular focus on IP can direct more of the conversation in LIS about social inequity more toward the concept of information-as-value, as outlined in the ACRL outline, and away from viewing membership in oppressed social groups as less socially desirable than membership in privileged groups.

Or, perhaps, as Cooke and Kitzie (2021) have argued, we don't need any additional lenses in LIS for bringing the work of groups on the margins into view; rather, we need to pay due attention to that work which already exists but is systematically undervalued. Cooke and Kitzie described the work of “outsiders-within-library and information science,” scholarship performed by scholar members of oppressed groups, scholars whose “work not only critically identifies how power shapes our understanding of traditional LIS worldviews, theories, and approaches, but offer new ways to counteract this power from the standpoints of those most oppressed—a departure from conventional White, male critical theoretical work” (p. 1290). While Cooke and Kitzie were responding to a call for a new LIS paradigm shift, their point is well-taken at the lesser level of a single concept (IP) as well.

The third possible benefit of IP as a foundational LIS concept is more specific to our own research approach. This conceptual exploration of IP serves as the basis for the first author's nascent study of how college students from non-U.S. backgrounds studying in the U.S. navigate the information landscapes of their adopted universities, and how their immigrant student status impacts their navigation of information for everyday life activities in the U.S. Toward this end, we are exploring IP as a way to frame immigrant students' information experiences with a focus on understanding differences in their information access (as IP) in their home and adopted countries. We consider immigration status as an additional possible contributor to IP, and we consider the value of extending the LIS IP discourse beyond current academic information needs and behaviors to include non-academic everyday life information needs and behaviors as well.

## **Conclusion and Suggestions for Incorporating Information Privilege into Lis Teaching And Curriculum Development**

With this essay we offer a fuller examination of the concept of information privilege and consider the possible benefits of incorporating it into teaching and curriculum development. Perhaps most significantly, keeping IP in mind when designing LIS degree programs and course learning outcomes can lead to teaching approaches that foster increased classroom discussion of structural barriers to equitable information access.

Additional suggestions for building IP into LIS curricula include:

1. Introducing the concept of information privilege early in the LIS curriculum, providing students with a foundational understanding of how societal structures and power dynamics shape individual and group access to information. This could involve discussions of how factors such as socioeconomic status, geographic location/immigration status, race, gender, and education level influence one's ability to obtain and utilize information effectively.
2. Integrating case studies and real-world examples that illustrate instances of information privilege and its implications within different information environments. By analyzing these examples, students can develop a critical lens through which to examine their own biases and assumptions, as well as identify strategies for promoting equity and inclusivity in their future professional practice.
3. Incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives from fields such as critical theory, social justice, and information ethics to enrich discussions on information privilege, encouraging students to explore its intersections with broader issues of power, inequality, and social justice in society, while maintaining a focus on information-as-value. Through these approaches, LIS educators can empower students to become proactive advocates for information equity and social change within their communities and professional spheres.
4. Discussing information privilege as an information-focused way of thinking about library and information science education within systems of structural oppression. We can ask students to examine existing LIS scholarship on the related concepts of anti-racism, classroom equity, critical race perspectives, social justice – especially scholarly products of members of historically oppressed groups -- to consider the main question we ask here: how might the concept of information privilege add a meaningful additional perspective for LIS education?

To conclude, we return to Cooke and Kitzie's (2021) paper on outsiders-within-LIS. It led us while writing this essay to rethink the potential value of proposing IP as an additional core concept of LIS. In doing so, we must consider the extent to which we are challenging systemic oppression, and the extent we might be adding to it. We hope that this essay leads to meaningful discussion of that very difficult question.

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