

TOWARD NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR  
LIBRARY AND INFORMATION  
SCIENCE

# ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP

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ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP VOLUME 51

**TOWARD NEW  
POSSIBILITIES  
FOR LIBRARY AND  
INFORMATION SCIENCE:  
THE USE OF SOCIAL  
MEDIA IN THE 2018  
WEST VIRGINIA  
TEACHERS' STRIKE**

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

I am delighted to take this opportunity and introduce myself as the new Series Editor of *Advances in Librarianship* since January 2021. In this capacity, I plan to extend the series' impact via integrating a critical perspective that spotlights social justice and inclusive praxis from the shadows to become an emerging canon at the very core of who we are and what we value as legit in Library and Information Science (LIS) scholarship and practice. This strategic vision requires destabilizing of entrenched hegemonies within our privileged ranks and external communities to alleviate intersecting political, economic, social, and cultural anxieties, and power imbalances we witness today. As we move toward the quarter-century mark, we also need to effectively document such paradigmatic shifts in LIS, serving as a foundation of inspiration upon which, together in our multiple identities and diversities, we can proudly contribute to the building of a meaningful society toward a brighter future for our children to inherit.

New stimulating models reimagining (or extending) the roles for cultural memory institutions (e.g., libraries, museums, archives, schools, etc.) and the field of information are much required to develop symbolic and real infrastructures for moving us forward. We also need to better tell our stories of information activism and community mobilization in the face of overwhelming challenges to human existence, from forces of neoliberal corporatization, political ransacking, media irresponsibility, climate change, environmental degradation, pandemic dis/misinformation, etc. What do the contemporary threats of human extinction and cultural decay mean for LIS professionals, be it scholars, researchers, educators, practitioners, students, and others embedded in a variety of information settings? Not only does it require actions in the “doing” of resistance via information to decenter dysfunctional powerbrokers and their oppressions and entitled privileges. However, disseminating a forward-thinking agenda and narrative beyond our internally focused bastardized institutional bastions is equally important, as we adopt an active stance to promote fairness, justice, equity/equality, change agency, empowerment, community building, and community development.

*Advances in Librarianship* holds a special place in the hands, hearts, and minds of readers as a key platform to support creative ideas and practices that change and better articulate the vital contributions of libraries and the impact of information on diverse multicultural communities in a global network information society. Moving forward, my aim for the series is to engage our diverse professional communities in critical discourse that enable real transformations to occur. It is important to propel progress in shifting entrenched positionalities in LIS, while making visible content related to the “margins.” Decentering canons and practices

toward equity of representation, inclusivity, and progressive change will naturally occur. Intersecting social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals in recent times demand an urgent response from the LIS professions in this regard.

I am truly honored and privileged to build on the legacy of Paul T. Jaeger, who served as Series Editor of *Advances in Librarianship* since 2013. His research helped to mobilize LIS in addressing concerns surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion more substantially beyond past lip service, also shaping the focus of the book series. I plan to operationalize new directions for single- or multi-authored book-length explorations and edited collections by shifting focus on understudied spaces, invisible populations from the margins, and knowledge domains that have been under-researched or under-published in what we consider as high impactful venues in LIS and beyond. Examples might involve a reflective journey that established, or newly emerging LIS scholars, researchers, practitioners, and students critically reflect, assess, evaluate, and propose solutions or actions to change entrenched practices and systemic imbalanced inequities in different library and information-related settings. It might also involve decolonizing LIS publication industries in their biased Euro/Anglo-centricities with inclusion of content from geographical diversities around the world.

I am reaching out to our multiple audiences for their support toward these goals in spreading the word for proposals to new volumes in the series. Let us find our “collective voice” in the LIS professions to make us all uncomfortable as we continue to “push the buttons,” thereby, becoming stronger in our quest to further social justice and develop our humanity, human dignity, respect, and potential to the fullest.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# INTRODUCTION

I feel as if I came to the discipline of library and information sciences (LIS) by sheer accident or, perhaps it is more appropriate to say, by luck. I never imagined myself an LIS professional, and most days I am still not sure that I am. My research and professional interests simply do not fit neatly into only one distinct academic discipline. And yet, in large measure, it feels most fitting to consider the broad field of LIS as my scholarly home base. My personal sense of connection to the field is strong. As a teenager in high school, the part-time job I held the longest was at the local public library branch in my small hometown located in the mountains of southwestern Virginia. Always an avid reader, that job satisfied my innate need to be immersed in books and only served to stoke my already insatiable curiosity about the world. I thought I had landed a job that paid me to read, but I now know that it was through that work that I first learned about information systems and organization and when I first encountered and interrogated issues of information seeking behavior and questions of information access.

But, of most importance, my job at the public library taught me about my community and the people who lived there. Behind the circulation desk, I encountered a steady stream of people who served as a representative sample of that place and of the wide range of information needs the users of its public library carried with them through its door. Parents looking for educational and social opportunities for their children, students working on research papers and book reports, job seekers, people who needed tax forms and publications, citizens searching for information about local government and resources, family members doing genealogical research, and everything in between – we lived in a world without Google then, so I developed the skills to navigate an ever-expanding universe of information utilizing an array of tools. More than anything else, though, I learned that my local library was about human beings far more than it was about books.

I intuited in those years what I would come decades later to explain through my academic research in the field, that especially in small, rural towns like my own and across the Appalachian region where I lived, local public libraries served as community anchors, hubs of critical information but also centers of engagement and social support (Sikes, 2020; Singh et al., 2021). Though I did not have the vocabulary for it as a high school student, I came to see libraries as playing

a unique and vital role in matters of social justice and equity in their local communities (Mehra et al., 2019, 2020). It is only in looking back that I am able to see this experience as foundational to how I continue to understand the field of LIS today, both theoretically and in terms of praxis.

Beyond the director of the two-county regional library system that included the branch where I worked, no one in my hometown library held an LIS degree. In high school, I did not even know of the existence of such a discipline or profession. I considered then, and still think now, of those of us who worked in the library primarily as people who wanted to help and who wanted to serve our neighbors as stewards of a wide variety of resources that assisted the members of our community in their daily lives. It was later in my graduate school experience that I could think more critically about the issue of LIS professionals working in partnership with people in ways that were empowering rather than understanding their primary role as that of gatekeepers of information. I left my hometown and went away to college with no inkling whatsoever of information sciences as something in which I was interested. I simply liked to read, to explore, to learn, and to ask questions about the world.

Despite this, and for a range of reasons mostly related to my lack of maturity, my undergraduate record was less than stellar. My wide-ranging interests at that age often strayed beyond the realm of the academic. Nevertheless, the college experience was transformative for me and intellectually stimulating in profound ways, but I still graduated college with little sense of what I would do next. I relished the thought of a career shaped by the world of knowledge and ideas and difficult questions, but I lacked a clear vision of how such a vocation might be realized. I yearned to continue my education in an advanced degree program, to become a scholar of some sort, but I had no confidence at all that I would be accepted into any graduate school. I thought the opportunity was simply not available to me, and I did not even bother to apply.

In the way of things, experience and perspective came with time, and it was many years later when I finally decided to pursue a graduate degree. The challenge, at that point, was that I was interested in everything. I considered and looked into master's programs in history, literature, theology, and cultural studies, but could not seem to find a singular thing that most suited me. As fate would have it, a librarian steered me down the path I would ultimately claim as my own. In the town in which I had settled after college, also a small community in the central Appalachian region, I was a faithful user and supporter of the local public library and had come to know the system director well. One morning we met for breakfast, and our conversation found its way to my search for a graduate program that would be right for me. The solution, to her, was clear. She was certain that I would find exactly what I needed in an information sciences degree, and she specifically directed me to the program at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville (UTK), a school located not all that far from our community. I reached out to the director of the School of information sciences at UTK on the very same day and started the admissions process soon after that conversation.

Truthfully, I cannot pinpoint why an LIS degree seemed like the perfect idea. I took a leap of faith, feeling that, while I had no idea where it would lead, such

a program would be as interdisciplinary as I could find, allowing me to explore the widest range of questions and issues. I thought back with fondness to my high school years and to my job at the public library, the variety of people in my community I came to know, the myriad subjects I encountered, and the variety of questions I fielded, but I really had no intention of becoming a librarian or of working in a library. As I started the degree, I did not have any clear idea of a particular end goal.

However, my first days in the program confirmed for me the idea that the landscape of LIS is vast and unbounded, the world of information intersecting as it does with every aspect of human life and with every discipline imaginable. This fact was and remains endlessly stimulating to me. Within my first few weeks as a master's student, we raised questions about the scope of the field, its origins and theoretical heritage, all based ultimately in other domains of knowledge, and in our discussions we scrutinized the tension between research and professional praxis. Immediately in those initial classes, I realized that I had found a kind of intellectual home from which to launch what I soon came to know would become a career in academia. It was as if I had rediscovered a calling. Thus, in my mind, not long after beginning my master's degree, it was clear to me that pursuing a Ph.D. was inevitable. I had a fervent desire to study the questions we were confronting in my courses. More than that, I wanted to raise other questions, to examine issues that were both central to LIS but that also expanded its range further and further afield into other and larger epistemological realms.

## **ISSUES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN LIS SCHOLARSHIP AND EDUCATION**

As a master's student, I was fortunate to discover the work of LIS scholars who were focused on matters of social justice, equity, and diversity. I realized there were others, though seemingly few and far between, who were primarily concerned with the role of information in our social world and with the special role of information organizations in local communities. I soon recognized, too, that such scholarship was not prevalent within the field nor was it of significant focus in our coursework. I noticed the incongruities between LIS research and praxis. Most of my classmates were practitioners in the profession, and an intuitive sense of public libraries as bastions of democratic ideals, civic mindedness, and social equity was pervasive in our class discussions. Yet, it was clear that such issues were under-examined and not as fully developed as were other kinds of questions found in the body of academic research within LIS as a field of inquiry (Rioux, 2010). Though issues of social justice were understood to be implicit in the work of information science professionals and organizations, the prevalent ontological and epistemological perspectives in LIS research and education were little concerned with examinations of the messy realities of our being human together. I learned that social justice as a concern within the field of LIS was emergent, nascent, and even to some extent marginalized itself (Jaeger et al., 2016; Mehra et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, in my time as a graduate student, the critical importance of these issues became further cemented for me. Once I discovered the work of others who shared this perspective and who served as models of wider possibilities for me, these kinds of questions became the only ones I wanted to raise. For me, such themes reflect information sciences as among the broadest of domains, interdisciplinary in its concern and beautifully weaving a central thread through the full tapestry of human knowledge. In the final year of my work toward the completion of a master's degree, I served as a research assistant on a major project to explore community engagement efforts on the part of public libraries located in central and southern Appalachia. This work produced a long list of scholarly publications and presentations, offered me valuable opportunities to develop research and writing skills, and expanded my thinking around the possibilities for research I myself could develop and conduct in the future.

That the region of Appalachia was a central element in the project was also important for me. I am of and from the region, and this is significant to my identity. I knew that issues and questions that are key or particular to Appalachia would be of fundamental concern to me no matter my chosen field or discipline. To participate in research that was place-focused only served to broaden my ideas of what I might study and also demonstrated for me how it could be done from the perspective of LIS scholarship. Once more, I was finding and confirming an understanding that LIS was a vast field, boundless in its scope, and both multilayered and interconnected in its wide reach.

## RESEARCH AND THE APPALACHIAN REGION

Just as issues of social justice occupy marginal space in LIS scholarship and education, so too does the region of Appalachia find itself diminished within the dominant social scientific discourse as well as in terms of the culture at-large. Long framed as separate and apart in ways both social and economic from the rest of mainstream culture, the idea of Appalachia carries conflicting connotations of rustic independence and backward ignorance, its people familiarly represented by reductive and demeaning stereotypes (Billings et al., 1999). As with most every predominantly rural place, Appalachia is regularly held up as a counterpoint to modern American ideas of progress in which the measures of development are about material production, consumption, extraction, and cultural values driven by urbanization (Eller, 2008).

We know Appalachia as a place because of the industrial economy. A region rich in natural resources, it became fixed in the nation's consciousness first as the outer American frontier and then as a place set apart for what could be taken from it in order to fuel economic development elsewhere (Stoll, 2017; Williams, 2002). This includes, of course, the wholesale erasure from the land of an array of indigenous nations and cultures whose existence precedes colonization by Anglo-European powers by thousands of years (Smith, 2016; Stump, 2018). The Appalachian Regional Commission (n.d.), a political and economic entity, defines Appalachia as a swath of terrain that stretches from northernmost Mississippi

along the length of a spine of mountain ridges all the way into the southernmost counties of New York. By this definition, the region includes over 400 counties in 13 states. However, most scholars and citizens of the region understand the place in far less precise terms. Shapiro (1986) called Appalachia an imagined place, an invention, pointing out the contradictions and destructive consequences of the reductionist view that this vast landscape can be considered “a coherent region inhabited by an homogenous population possessing a uniform culture” (p. ix).

Likewise, there was no singular industry that shaped the economic and social history of the region of Appalachia, though we can say that mining and other sectors based on the extraction of resources – from coal to textiles to tourism – are elemental to the stories of most communities there (Eller, 1982; Williams, 2002). Furthermore, there is also little doubt that coal mining plays an outsized role in any understanding of the history and culture of Appalachia as well as in the perceptions of the region by outsiders. This is the case despite the precipitous decline over the last few decades in the real economic impact of coal (Bell & York, 2010; Bodenhamer, 2016; Lewin, 2019). The pervasiveness of exploitative industries in the region also means that its history cannot be told without equal attention to labor activism and to fights for economic justice on the part of its citizens (Fisher, 1993; Wilkerson, 2019). The story of Appalachia is complex and dynamic, and it includes a long record of citizen activism for fair wages, safe working conditions, access to healthcare and clean drinking water, and equitable educational and economic opportunities, to name just a few (Egolf et al., 2009; Hall, 1986).

Yet, these struggles are not merely the stuff of history. In 2018, in the midst of my graduate studies, public school teachers in the state of West Virginia walked off their jobs in protest of a host of proposed changes to the health insurance program that covers all public employees in the state. With their salaries already ranked as lowest among teachers in the country, the changes to the public health insurance system would have resulted in increased costs, fewer benefits, and new policies and programs many considered to be a significant intrusion on personal privacy (Blanc, 2019; Brescia, 2020; McAleve, 2018). Moreover, teachers were fed up with what they saw as an increasingly demanding and hostile working environment cultivated primarily by an antagonistic state legislature.

Like many across the country, I watched with awed inspiration as the events of the West Virginia teachers’ strike moved over the course of nearly two weeks toward a culmination that included the scrubbing of all proposed changes to the insurance program and in a pay increase for teachers and other public employees. I followed the coverage of national media outlets, most of which drew attention to the use of social media by the teachers to organize themselves and their actions before and during the strike (Bidgood & Robertson, 2018). I live scarcely 50 miles from the state of West Virginia and am the spouse of a public educator, and being of the Appalachian region is a large part of who I consider myself to be. I followed the story of the teachers’ strike with both pride and admiration.

A short time later, when I was seeking a compelling topic for my doctoral research, the teachers’ strike was at the forefront of my mind. There was no question for me that the event was an issue that merited intensive study within the realm of information sciences. From my perspective, all human events are

ostensibly events of information. More succinctly, though, the significant elements of social media and information communication technologies found in contemporary collective movements like the West Virginia strike meant that such events were clearly within the purview of the field.

The West Virginia teachers' strike of 2018 has taken its place among a host of movements of dissent, protest, and revolution that have occurred across the globe in the last decade in which social media played a fundamental role. The study of social movements has been dramatically transformed by the rise of social media and the use of related information communication technologies in events of protest. Some contend that new information technologies allow for broader participation in social movements by significantly reducing or utterly negating the personal costs, thereby increasing the reach of democracy.

Social media, though, for all its connotations of connectivity and community, affixes its primary concern on the needs of the individual, wielding extraordinary influence on our behaviors and identities. Furthermore, social media companies appear more interested not in communities of users, but in the market value of the vast and varied amount of personal data generated by those users. Born of a modernist paradigm of human exceptionalism, such a view is rooted in the understanding that all social problems are solvable because of humanity's propensity for unmitigated progress and technological ingenuity.

Yet, what must also be considered in the action taken by the teachers in West Virginia is their collective identity with the place, with their students, and with a sense of duty to one another and to the community. There is a need to move beyond simplistic and techno-centric frameworks by taking a critical approach that affords a more holistic and humanizing analysis. Such a perspective encapsulates the intersectionality and interconnectedness of a complex web of issues and problems that present themselves within the domain of LIS. The field is clearly concerned with the way information is organized, stored, and accessed. I believe it ought also to be concerned with the ways in which information impacts our lives and our social world.

Furthermore, the collective action taken by the teachers was a fight for social justice and equity and was about the empowerment of people to find their voice in an effort to demand change. As a subject, the strike aligned perfectly with my broadening ideas of what LIS research and scholarship can entail and with my hope to contribute work that pushes the field toward domains otherwise under-considered and that intersect with a range of academic disciplines.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

I have written this book primarily for LIS educators, researchers, and students. It begins from a perspective of the field of information sciences as a vast and interconnected web of questions and issues that cross multiple disciplinary boundaries. And it calls for the consideration of new possibilities for LIS scholarship in the embrace of our humanity, creativity, and connections. In the end, I spell out a need for the dismantling of structures and paradigms that place unnecessary

limits on our understanding of what research can be and on our ways of knowing and interrogating the world. At the core of the book is a critical examination of the use of information communication technology in social movements and related events of protest and dissent based on qualitative data from participants in the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike. As academic research, this topic is itself bold and new ground for the field and serves as an example of what a broader conception of LIS scholarship can realize. Framing that examination is a critical self-reflection of my time as a doctoral student in an LIS program. This reflective journey forms the basis for my argument that education and research in the field should reach beyond the dominant ontological and epistemological perspectives that pervade the field of information sciences.

Thus, I offer both a critical examination of the role of information technology in events of collective action and social movements as well as a critical perspective of LIS education and scholarship. I will present an analysis that moves beyond the bounds of rationalistic and transactional views of human behavior toward a more complex consideration of how information is communicated and accessed in events like the West Virginia teachers' strike. Likewise, I will challenge LIS scholars to move beyond the bounds of rationalistic and transactional views of research and education and to seek to better understand the full human and social implications of an information saturated world.

The book is organized into seven chapters. Chapter One considers a number of problematic issues in higher education, in general, as understood through the lens of my own journey through a Ph.D. program in LIS and advances a new vision of education in the field. The second chapter will briefly introduce the grievances that led to the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike and will provide a general discussion of the overarching theoretical and sociological concerns that were at the basis of my doctoral research. The third chapter sets the story of my own research within the larger academic and philosophical contexts that informed my work. In Chapter Four, I confront the methodological problems presented by a critical perspective and offer a self-examination of my own sociopolitical position and the subsequent implications for how my research was operationalized. The fifth chapter pushes beyond the jargonized and typical reporting of research data, offering an example of how a creative approach can give us a more compelling understanding of what is learned from academic research. This chapter presents the story of the 2018 strike as told in the voices of the teachers who experienced it and also includes a follow-up discussion of what meaning can be made from this story. Chapter Six discusses the conclusive findings of my doctoral research and spells out clearly what was learned about the role of social media and collective identity from the teachers' strike. Finally, the seventh and final chapter will sum up my own reflective journey and offer a new vision for the LIS scholarship and education, one that challenges dominant ways of knowing and learning about the social world through academic research.