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Book review:

Paradoxes of Media and Information Literacy: A Crisis of Information

Jutta Haider & Olof Sundin (2022) Paradoxes of media and information literacy: The crisis of information (1st ed.). Taylor & Francis.

The aim of Jutta Haider and Olof Sundin's recently published *Paradoxes of Media and Information Literacy: A Crisis of Information* is to interrogate the challenges that current technological and social upheaval is perceived to engender within understandings of media and information literacy. Examined through five paradoxes- responsibility, normativity, temporality, trust, and neutrality- the book also aims to bridge divisions between media and information literacy research, as well as, perhaps, discordant narratives within the field of information literacy itself. This is a tall order for a 174-page text, but it is one that is welcomed, especially by those of us who value information literacy as an umbrella term or field of study, rather than as a side-lined after thought.

The initial premise for the book lies in the perception that information literacy is becoming increasingly tested in an age of "ubiquitous information systems based on invisible algorithms, and premised on data extraction and market logic." (p.16). Within this framing, information literacy is simultaneously positioned as both ideally suited to and irrevocably changed by what the authors refer to as a "crisis of information" (p.1). Creating a meta-paradox of its own, these ideas are unpacked through an interrogation of five specific contradictions or self-contradictions (p.14) within the information literacy narrative, with the goal of extending research and practice in the area. Thus, the paradox of responsibility explores how individual obligations for dealing with "false or ambiguous claims" (p.30) conflicts with conceptions of individual choice, while the paradox of normativity deals with the contradiction between prescriptive and situated information literacy goals. Within the temporal paradox, ideas of progress are challenged by the need for information literacy to be both "future-oriented and historically aware" (p.88), a dichotomy that is mirrored within the trust paradox,

which positions information as equally reliant on and challenging of an “unconditional trust in information” (p.116). The final paradox refers to neutrality, or the idea that information literacy concepts can be “weaponised” to serve very different political aims and goals (p.138). Running throughout these inter-related sections are broader concepts of evidence, authority, expertise, and bias- all of which become unsettled within this “volatile” information environment.

There is much to admire about this book, not least because the need to examine the less palatable aspects of information literacy is long overdue. It has not been until recently that research has started to prod at information literacy’s hidden corners, including how knowing is developed in relation to dark knowledge (Burnett & Lloyd, 2020) and how COVID scepticism (Lee et al., 2021) and vaccine hesitancy (Hicks & Lloyd, 2022) is predicated upon the enactment of proficient information literacy practices. Haider and Sundin provide the space to interrogate these ideas further, including in relation to the impact on liberal democracy and civil society. Providing a refreshing contrast to the usual affirmative (Hicks & Lloyd, 2022) or fairy-tale (Olsson, 2010) narratives of progress, this approach also brings home the inherent (and potentially dangerous) issues that virtuous, ‘nice white lady’ narratives of information literacy harbour. It is additionally energising to see work that starts from an assertion of information literacy’s sociomaterial shape rather than its defence. Adding to our growing understanding of how material infrastructure constrains and enables the enactment of information literacy practice, this approach also provides a glimpse of how information literacy research could develop in future.

The authors’ decision to focus on paradoxes, which cuts across the media and information literacy field, provides one such case in point. Eschewing the more traditional territorial approach to research, the foregrounding of socially impactful questions provides a valuable example of how scholarship in our field can move beyond a rehashing of entrenched disciplinary quarrels and disagreements. While it is not fully clear how Haider and Sundin arrived at these paradoxes, it is obvious that collective organisation provides a way in which media literacy and the many splintered strands of information literacy might be able to address the scale of these challenges. At the same time, paradoxes are painted broadly enough to ensure that the “rich and important tradition of information literacy research” (p.10) does not get lost within the proposed merger, something that is important given the relative size of each field. Other interesting new approaches for information literacy research that are presented in this book include the integration of snippets of empirical material alongside more informal anecdotes and the noticeable integration of critical information studies work from the United States into existing scholarship. The emphasis on research from technology-driven fields rather than the information behaviour literature with which information literacy research is (rightly or wrongly) typically associated provides an interesting potential foretaste of changing influences and allegiances within this field of study.

The book is ambitious, though, and the broad sweep of the narrative means that some key ideas are glossed over. It would have been interesting, for example, to have reflected further on the link between information literacy and social responsabilisation (p.26) or the idea that certain (marginalised) groups need to be altered (p.83) to fulfil information literacy’s future promise. The breadth of the topic also means that the paradox thread occasionally gets lost within the text (for example in Chapter 6), a charge that could also, perhaps, be levelled at the treatment of information literacy itself. The original premise of the book was to “challenge taken-for-granted assumptions” (p.4) about information literacy or to explore how information literacy is shaped or made possible within the current socio-political environment (p.74). Yet the picture of information literacy that the authors paint is somewhat static: something that should be taught better or differently rather than a concept that might be fundamentally altered or modified by emerging infrastructures. The book might also have benefitted from more of a problematisation of the “information crisis” subtitle; while the authors provide useful caveats about the limits of the metaphor, situating information literacy in

terms of an exceptional or abnormal state could be seen as distancing it from broader contextual framings, including an interrogation of power and inequality. The frequent use of crisis to launch problematic policy on distracted citizens (Klein, 2007) provides a further illustration of the need to consider this positioning carefully.

References

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