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Only One Information Ecosystem, or Many?

Examining How Information Privilege in the Framework Impacts International Students

With the first review for the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education approaching, it is time to reflect on its scope, utility, and impact in guiding academic librarians in teaching information literacy concepts to undergraduate students. While many have praised the Framework for incorporating stronger elements of critical librarianship and a deeper discussion of sociocultural context than the previous Standards,¹ the Framework has room to improve in its introduction and frames by further acknowledging that there is more than one global information ecosystem.

Information privilege as a discrete concept was coined by Char Booth in 2014 and situates information literacy in a sociocultural context, defining “*information* as the media and messages that underlie individual and collective awareness and knowledge building; *privilege* as the advantages, opportunities, rights, and affordances granted by status and positionality via class, race, gender, culture, sexuality, occupation, institutional affiliation, and political perspective.”² Amber Sewell advances this concept by emphasizing that information privilege is not only about access to information resources, but also about awareness of information resources, and experience with information resources and the research process.³ This article will use Sewell’s three domains of information privilege as the lens from which we identify impactful elements that differentiate information ecosystems and consider the sociocultural contexts of our students, focusing particularly on those who have grown up in different information ecosystems: international students.

Privilege in the Framework and International Students

One alarming limitation of the Framework is that it takes the stance that there is only one information ecosystem.⁴ The introduction of the Framework justifies its existence by stating that, “the rapidly changing higher education environment, along with the dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem *in which all of us work and live*, require new attention to be focused on foundational ideas about *that ecosystem*”⁵ (emphasis mine). By positing that everyone works and lives in the same information ecosystem, it creates the illusion that foundational ideas and privileges within that ecosystem are universal. And that’s just not the case. Others assert that because the Framework does not address these implications, particularly the sociopolitical contexts of teaching and learning, that power imbalances are simply acknowledged and accepted rather than resisted, displaying an ambivalent posture in its understanding of power relations.⁶

While all students come to college with diverse backgrounds, many international students’ experiences with information privilege differ significantly from their US peers. The following

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sections will demonstrate key differences in information awareness, information experiences, and information access that have situated many international students in different ecosystems of information privilege when they arrive at college. The assumption made by the Framework, and therefore often perpetuated during library instruction, detrimentally devalues the personal and lived experiences of international students with information.⁷ There is still global inequality of awareness, experiences, and access to free, commercial, and high-speed information resources.⁸

Awareness of Information Resources

People in the US and other Westernized countries have the privilege of learning about many types of information resources with little to no censorship. This encourages spirited debate, deep dialogue, and open-ended inquiry to create new knowledge, as described in the Research as Inquiry frame.⁹ Unlike the US, some countries limit their citizens to only certain information producers and content, and do not allow editorial independence or freedom of the press. For example, countries such as China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia, among others, use state-run or state-owned media to communicate approved messages to their residents who have little or no access to independently run media options. This restricts what information resources are available to the public, infringing on the “public’s right to reliable, independent, and diverse news and information,”¹⁰ and inhibiting open exploration of diverse perspectives during inquiry. Global internet freedom has declined 13 years in a row, with China being found to be the worst environment for internet freedom for the last nine years according to a key finding from Freedom House.¹¹ A government may even censor information for its residents that originates from another country and is perceived to criticize the government.¹² For example, China’s restrictive information ecosystem is believed to affect many Chinese international students’ views of credibility of various health resources.¹³ Textbooks in restrictive countries are also the primary vehicle for teaching students about their country’s history. These books perpetuate the “correct” view of history. Some students accept these narratives and conform to cultural ideologies; others reject these narratives and “express anger with the state’s efforts to distort the history they are taught.”¹⁴

Likewise, intellectual freedom and freedom of expression vary globally. In certain countries, citizens risk becoming imprisoned or executed for their identities or their actions promoting certain ideas and opinions.¹⁵ Societal values ingrained from an early age continue to influence and impact how individuals interact with certain information. For example, international students from countries with limited freedom of expression may be dismayed by library programs and collections promoting values that they might view as Westernized and “too political,” such as LGBTQ+ programs or books.¹⁶ Or they may be afraid to borrow resources that criticize their home country’s leadership and political systems. International students who are not used to safely exercising intellectual freedom may find open-ended inquiry and intentional seeking out conflicting perspectives to be both academically and personally challenging.

Recommendation: The Research as Inquiry frame should reflect that students from countries where information is highly controlled may have acquired different strategies and dispositions for approaching the research process that conflict with the open-ended and inquiry-based nature of the frame.

Experience with Information Resources

Many US colleges and universities reinforce the notion that the most valid way that information becomes knowledge is by publishing information through traditional channels such as through an academic or commercial publisher. Publishing content in this way often relies on the author accessing privileges such as having financial support from an institution to conduct their research, funding to publish open access, time dedicated to research, and support services available for research and writing. Additionally, research shows that the traditional publishing process is rife with inequitable biases against women, people of color, and new researchers.¹⁷ Format and peer-review processes are indicators of credibility as stated in the Information Creation as a Process frame.¹⁸ Reliable and valid scientific research methods are largely established within individual disciplines with newer methods slow to become accepted.

However, there are many other ways in which information becomes knowledge in a shared cultural community. Many students who identify as Indigenous come to college with *other ways of knowing*, ways that can be challenged in an American research environment, such as faith-based interpretations of reality, experience-based knowledge, and authority-based knowledge passed down through generations.¹⁹ An increasing amount of library literature focuses on Indigenous librarianship and cultural heritage.²⁰ There certainly are ethical issues and challenges in documenting Indigenous knowledge and making it accessible for non-Indigenous audiences.²¹ A library in Australia worked with local Indigenous leaders and discovered that certain artifacts are considered to have “secret or sacred knowledge” and should not be available for public viewing, and instead are sequestered in a special collection.²²

Collecting and disseminating intangible cultural heritage, or the “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills,”²³ also presents unique challenges for libraries. Public libraries across the world collect information represented in oral histories,²⁴ including original language,²⁵ performing arts, social practices, “knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe,”²⁶ and items of traditional craftsmanship. Libraries across the globe preserve and disseminate intangible cultural heritage resources of local cultures by hosting cultural events, cultivating social networks spanning multiple generations, encouraging local experts to share their knowledge, and training library employees to be more knowledgeable about intangible cultural heritage.²⁷ International students who have experiential authority or expertise in other ways of knowing may correctly perceive that their US instructors and librarians may not value certain indigenous information-creation processes and formats during the research and writing process, which still largely values empirical and scientific methods over other ways of knowing.²⁸

Citation practices and viewpoints also differ globally.²⁹ While some international students may be used to particular citation practices, they are often surprised at having to learn new ways of citing sources and are more often accused of committing plagiarism. One student who completed her undergraduate degree in her home country of South Korea describes her experience attending graduate school in Australia: “For the whole of my undergraduate degree . . . I wrote one small essay for an elective course. When I got to postgraduate level at an Australian university . . . I had to learn how to use sources and how to cite sources. (This was the most difficult thing to adjust to.)”³⁰ Few colleges or universities explicitly teach citation, as it’s assumed that citation is taught in secondary schools. International students often must learn citation practices on their own or with the help of academic success centers.

Recommendation: The Information Creation as a Process frame should reflect that there may be information formats that are unique to certain cultures or communities, that experiences with other ways of knowing are culturally authoritative, and that Indigenous knowledge may be protected.

Recommendation: The Information Has Value frame should expand to include cultural value, emphasizing that information preserves cultural heritage and appreciating that cultural treatments of the information lifecycle make cultures distinct and remarkable.

Accessing Information Resources

Libraries often serve to provide access to quality, high-speed information for free to their patrons. But access to library spaces, services, and resources differ across the world.

In some countries, there are many libraries and librarians per capita, with Europe and North America having the most libraries and librarians per person, while the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa have the fewest.³¹ Geographic privilege, where libraries are common and nearby, impacts how many people can visit their local library as well as how often. While many libraries aim to bridge the digital divide by serving as public access facilities, some libraries do not always have consistent electricity, as is the case in Kenya and Botswana, impacting if electronic resources are available to their patrons at their point of need when they visit, or only print resources.³²

Resource availability and accessibility are also largely geography dependent. Students who used information resources in other countries may be surprised to find that those same resources are not available in their academic library. It's also worth noting that there are differences in how research is disseminated based on country GDP. Open access diamond journals in low-GDP countries favor indexing in DOAJ and Google Scholar, while high-GDP countries favor indexing in vendor-based subscription resources such as Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest.³³

In the US, many libraries have become viewed as safe places for their patrons to find information. Safety and times of national peace are privileges, certainly. As mentioned above, libraries safely store objects of cultural heritage, ensuring cultural survival. But as war seeks to obliterate local cultures, libraries in wartime, such as currently in Ukraine, are often targeted by the enemy's military so that these cultural artifacts can be destroyed.³⁴ Students from war-ravaged countries may not associate libraries with safety.

Some international students may not realize the extent to which academic libraries in the US take patron privacy seriously. Many academic libraries try to reinforce a sense of patron privacy and safety when researching in the library by periodically purging patron records, refusing to install high-resolution security cameras, and reviewing database privacy guarantees when signing vendor contracts. Students who have lived in countries where surveillance is the norm may be afraid to research certain topics, read certain sources, write critically of their government, or publicly reveal aspects of their identities. Indeed, there frankly is good reason for international students to be cautious when conducting research in the US, especially if they are using equipment purchased in a different country.³⁵ Human Rights Watch interviewed Chinese international students who attended college outside of China who were targeted, doxed, and threatened for making critical remarks about their homeland. One student says about his college experience, "I'm worried about being doxed again and the intimidation. I changed my name on Facebook. Sometimes I feel like I am being watched on campus."³⁶

Librarian qualifications, training, and staffing take different forms in other countries, impacting access to library services and informational resources. Some countries have different degree or certification requirements for librarians than the US.³⁷ Where librarians receive their training will impact what resources are available to them and which resources they purchase and promote. Some international students may be used to different search engines and databases available in their home countries and may have to learn to use new search tools when conducting academic research in the US. Some countries that have legal mandates for school librarians, such as South Korea, still struggle to have school libraries that are fully staffed with trained librarians to meet the mandate.³⁸ International students who are fortunate to have had a school librarian may have been taught a different classification system other than the Dewey Decimal System or the Library of Congress classification system, and they may need to learn a new classification system when they arrive at college to successfully locate books in their academic library.

There are other variables that impact information access for international students, such as experiences with information technologies. Some international students may acquire brands of smartphones and laptops that are popular in the US for the first time when they arrive at college, requiring them to learn how to use this technology as a new student.³⁹ Academic librarians may find it challenging to assist students who are using technology from other countries for research due to differences in how the technology operates. Language privilege also comes into play; international students may seek articles in their primary language, articles that are not readable to their instructors and librarians. On the other hand, some international students struggle with verbal and written English, then also have to learn the "language" of academia and research jargon and other aspects of the hidden curriculum.⁴⁰ Additionally, differences in cultural capital (the ability to access and use cultural knowledge) are based in often obscure cultural privileges of the dominant society and ultimately impact marginalized students' perceptions and experiences with libraries and research.⁴¹ Finally, international students must contend with the challenge that they are likely to lose access to even more resources upon graduation compared to domestic students, as some resources may not be available at all in their home countries.

Recommendation: The Searching as Strategic Exploration frame should reflect that available information resources, library spaces and services, and librarian training vary globally, impacting how some international students have learned to seek information.

Conclusion

The Framework assumes that undergraduates studying at American colleges and universities have grown up in a Western-dominant sociocultural information ecosystem. However, there are many facets to information privilege that meaningfully contribute to the isolation of different information ecosystems. While the Framework has rectified some of the critiques of the Standards by occasionally acknowledging sociocultural contexts, particularly in the Authority is Constructed and Contextual and Information Has Value frames, and even mentions information privilege, there is still room for growth. As the review of the Framework is imminent, the review task force may want to consider how the Framework impacts students from different ecosystems of information privilege determined by socio-cultural contexts. Making such changes to the Framework would invite teaching librarians to more deeply consider and acknowledge how international students who grow up in

different information ecosystems are shaped by their varied experiences interacting with information. As a result, teaching librarians can better prepare to teach students who arrive at college having experienced fundamental differences in their awareness of, experiences with, and access to informational resources. A seventh frame proposed by Laura Saunders, which is focused on social justice, includes some dispositions that address this gap.⁴² I am hopeful that as Booth's term "information privilege" becomes ever more acknowledged, teaching librarians will thoughtfully consider how information awareness, experiences, and access especially impact our international student populations. ↯

Notes

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