Richard M. Cho

Information in the Age of Infocracy

Recalibrating the Definition of Information for Library Instruction

The word *information* has been fluidly used by various disciplines throughout history. In our hyperdigitalized world, where the massification of information has transformed how and why we seek, create, and use information, the word is taking another epistemological turn. Portmanteaus like infoglut, infodemic, inforg, and infocracy abound in our society, all of which denote a state of information overload. These neologisms suggest information's dysfunctionality in present-day society.

As part of Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, ACRL defines *information literacy* without first properly defining the word *information*, even though it appears four times in the one-sentence-long definition.[1] Without properly defining the word that forms the core of the concept that we teach, it is difficult to collaboratively articulate the mission of our instruction.

At the University of California, Irvine, a public institution serving nearly 30,000 undergraduate students,[2] I lead several one-shot library sessions per quarter, many of which are for undergraduate writing requirement courses. In the fall quarter of 2024, I wrote a new learning outcome ("After the library session, the students will be able to characterize 'information' in the context of our hyper-digitalized 21st century in order to mindfully interact with information."), experimented with a new lesson plan, and learned a few best practices on engaging students with the concept of information literacy. This article delineates the emerging discourses on information and offers insights from my own attempts to engage students with its evolving nature in my library instruction sessions.

The 21st Century Infosphere

The hyperdigitalized 21st century has warped what information is and does. According to the Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science, *information* means "Data presented in readily comprehensible form to which meaning has been attributed within the context of its use. In a more dynamic sense, the message conveyed by the use of a **medium of communication** or expression. Whether a specific message is informative or not depends in part on **the subjective perception** of the person receiving it"[3] (bold added for emphasis). In 2025, a medium of communication overwhelmingly manifests on electronic devices that are on 24/7. Thus, if we follow Marshall McLuhan's maxim that the medium is the message,[4] and we defer to Claude Shannon, who defined information as the message between the sender and the receiver (i.e., "information as something transmitted

Richard M. Cho is the research librarian for humanities and literature at University of California, Irvine, email: rmcho@uci.edu.

from one point to another"[5]), then it is true that—because society has shifted irreversibly from analog to digital in our necessary daily habits, primarily in order to tailor to the neoliberal imperatives (faster communication and more transparency for limitless choices and consumption)—the definition of information needs a recalibration.

New Theoretical Grounds

Traditionally, *information* has been defined as "letters and messages, sounds and images, news and instructions, figures and facts, signals and signs: a hodgepodge of related species"[6] that attempt to represent reality to the receiving mind. Here, I list two other definitions, in my own paraphrase, that are gaining momentum in our age of information:

(1) Information as something that connects disparate units into a network to create a new reality. It *connects* rather than *represents*.[7]

(2) Bits circulating in a hyper-real space with minimal reference to reality. Its main function is neither to represent nor to connect but to stimulate.[8]

Yuval Harari, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem who is best known for his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, focuses not on what information *is* but rather on what information *does* in his book *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Network*. Harari attends to the latter morpheme of the word *information*—although many interpret it as something that informs, he emphasizes the *formation* utility, and he adds that information has no essential link to truth.[9] This new definition allows us to perceive information as more relational and causal than informative, and it prompted me to mull over how the deluge of information (de)forms reality for our students.

Another interpretation gaining traction is by Byung-Chul Han, a cultural studies philosopher writing in German who is known for his book *Burnout Society*. He argues that "democracy gives way to a data-driven infocracy that seeks to optimize the exchange of information."[10] In this case, the essence of information is surprise and the stimulus it provides. Because of the sheer amount of information that bombards us daily, our brains have adapted to "de-facticize" information to deal with this excess. This phenomenon has the direct link to the proliferation of mis/disinformation and to our declining trust in American institutions, especially among Gen Z. Han says:

> Information is relevant only fleetingly. Because it lives off the "appeal of surprise," information lacks temporal stability, and because of its temporal instability, it fragments our perception. It draws reality into a "permanent frenzy of actuality." It is not possible to linger on information. This makes the cognitive system restless. The compulsion towards acceleration inherent in information means that time-intensive cognitive practices such as knowledge, experience and insight are pushed aside.[11]

Information has become less a source of knowledge than a source of constant stimuli, which distracts us from time-intensive endeavors.

Gen Z Students' Experience with Information

How should the library profession define information? The writers of the ACRL Framework may have had vastly different experiences with information than our current students, many of whom have had smartphones since their primary school years. This difference is

profound and cannot be overlooked, as the tenets of information have shifted irrevocably over the years, mainly due to the available information communication tools. College students today are processing information on a scale never before seen, and it is common to see them with their eyes glued to a screen, whether they are eating in campus cafeteria or walking across a quad. The constant neural connection renders information as something merely fleeting and stimulating. Guiding them to realize how their everyday interactions with information are changing their information-seeking behaviors is the first step toward information literacy. This step begins with defining information.

New Approach

In my library instruction sessions, I begin by asking students how they would define information and encourage them to share their definitions via an online education tool, such as Google Doc or a Padlet, so that everyone can see their classmates' answers (Figure 1). Many opted for a single-worded answer, such as "data" or "knowledge," with few articulating further. Two of my favorite answers so far are (1) "information is facts and data that are used to have people know about the world around them," meaning information as a representation of reality, and (2) "pieces of
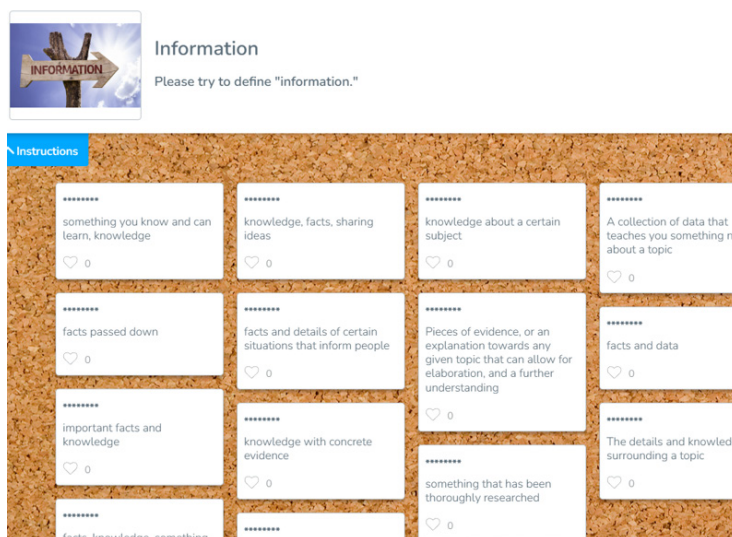

Figure 1: Example of an online collaborative board showing students' answers to the question "Please try to define 'information.'"

evidence, or an explanation towards any given topic that can allow for elaboration, and a further understanding," meaning that information, though it informs, still leaves room for "elaboration and a further understanding." Then I ask them if the information they attain through their everyday digital gadgets fits into their own definitions. Afterward, I propose a revision to our collective output, recalibrating the definition in light of our hyperdigitalized world.

Starting the session this way (student-centered, sharing with classmates, and expanding the conceptual understanding of their prior knowledge) is a promising way to garner attention and trust. In addition, collaboratively defining the word *information* offers a smooth segway into the next lesson plan on a research method, such as source differentiation and keyword selection.

Best Practices for Discussing Information with Students

Instructors these days face an additional challenge to make their presentations more alluring than the offerings of a restive smartphone in students' pockets and hands. In my attempts to converse about information with students, I learned a few lessons on how best to keep them interested in the topic.

1) Start from what they know. Everyone believes they know what information is. Ask them to share anonymously their definitions of information. Point out common features of their answers and some anomalies that go deeper than others.

2) Ask them to reflect on their own experiences with information. What is their everyday information-seeking behavior? Is it via a smartphone, computer, book, or human-to-human interaction? From which medium do they receive most of their information? Does the medium matter?

3) Include interesting tidbits about the multivariate nature of information. When time allows, I have used a slide with an example of the (inter)subjective nature of information. (Figure 2)

4) Use visual guides whenever possible. Present with accessible and engaging slides to facilitate the students' understanding. A side-by-side comparisons slide between information and narrative is presented here as an example.[12] (Figure 3)

5) Emphasize their own stake in this issue. As my learning outcome indicated, *mindfully* interacting with information is the goal. It is said that we have transitioned from democracy (rule by people) to infocracy (rule by information). What might be the consequences of a constant neural connection?

6) Make connections to practical research methods and skills. Connect the dots to elucidate the relationship between their everyday information behavior and the academic research methods they should use for their class assignments. I emphasize the difference between intentional search versus algorithmic pull.

Figure 2: PowerPoint slide showing the intersubjective nature of information, using as an example a social issue students care about.
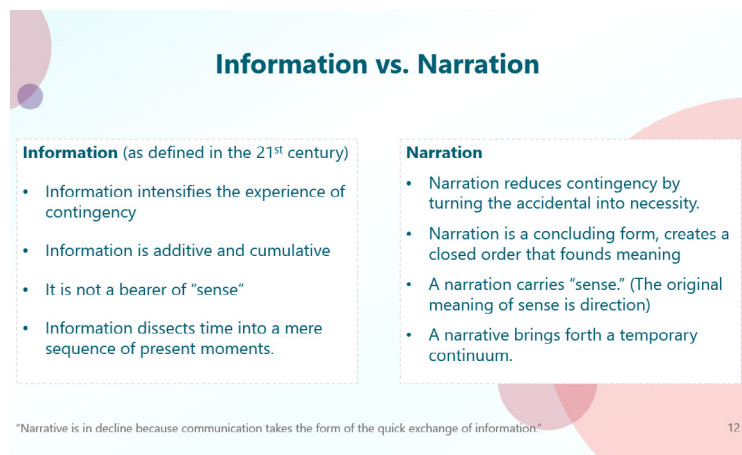

Figure 3: PowerPoint slide showing the crucial contrast between "information" and "narration."

Conclusion

What makes an information-literate citizen? This is an important question for all teaching librarians to ask. Becoming information-literate begins from properly understanding what information is and how it functions in our age. It is said of our current epoch that we are held captive by information, a paroxysm of a sort, which results in impoverished attachment. Frederick Nietzsche once said, "From lack of repose our civilization is turning into a new barbarism."[13] If Stalinism had its beginning in a wrongheaded political ideal and Nazism in the national economic hardship in need of a scapegoat, then Trumpism has begun on a different ground. The seed may have sprouted from the lack of repose because of the excess of information. The library, an institution indispensable to the functioning of democracy, has a vital role to play in this era of unrest. ✍

Notes

1. American Library Association, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education", February 9, 2015, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

2. University of California, Irvine, "University Facts", May 2024, https://uci.edu/university-facts.

3. Joan M. Reitz, *ODLIS: Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science*, accessed December 9, 2024, https://odlis.abc-clio.com/odlis_jk.html.

4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1964).

5. James Gleick, *Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* (Vintage Books, 2011), 246.

6. James Gleick, *Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* (Vintage Books, 2011), 7.

7. Yuval Noah Harari, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* (Random House, 2024).

8. Byung-Chul Han, *Infocracy*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Polity Press, 2022).

9. Yuval Noah Harari, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* (New York: Random House, 2024), 18.

10. Byung-Chul Han, *Infocracy*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Polity Press, 2022), 43.

11. Byung-Chul Han, *Infocracy*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Polity Press, 2022), 18.

12. Byung-Chul Han, *The Crisis of Narration*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Polity Press, 2024).

13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber (University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 172.