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Information Literacy Policy Development in Canada: Is It Time?

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Abstract

This article examines policy issues related to information literacy in Canada. It provides some background on the information literacy concept, reflecting on popular definitions offered by American, British, and Australian library associations, before advocating for a broader definition that views information literacy as a human right. Information literacy is also considered in relationship to the proliferation of other "literacies," such as digital, web, media, and information technology, that are the subject of increased advocacy and attention from interest groups and educators. The ongoing need for improved information literacy levels is analyzed not only in the context of inputs (the increasing complexity of the information environment) but also in terms of potential personal, social, and economic outcomes that can be realized through widespread information literacy education efforts. The paper argues that information literacy must become a priority not only among academic librarians but also school, public, and special librarians, as well as others outside of the library sector, if significant improvements in information literacy levels are to be realized. Such a coordinated approach can only be achieved in the context of policies that require, and adequately support, widespread efforts at improving information literacy levels. After a review of the ad-hoc state of information literacy education in Canada today, this paper analyzes information literacy-related policy development efforts in Canada to date in the four arenas where one would expect to see such activity: the Government of Canada, provincial governments, library associations, and other stakeholder groups. This article aims to start a wide-reaching discussion about information literacy and associated policy issues in Canada.

Keywords

information literacy; policy development; Canada

Introduction

Recent years have seen a flurry of activity related to information literacy advocacy and policy development around the world. Many national library associations have developed statements and standards to guide information literacy educational efforts, and in some cases these inform government policy. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

has held several international forums on the topic of information and related literacies and encourages nations to be proactive in developing strategies for advancing the cause in their countries. Many nations have developed substantial responses, creating policies and frameworks to guide the information literacy education of all citizens at all points of their lives. However, despite a great deal of effort by individual Canadian librarians to increase information literacy levels in their local contexts, Canada seems to have made little progress in systematically advocating for information literacy and achieving policy developments to support widespread adoption and delivery of information literacy education. This paper seeks to reopen the discussion about information literacy among Canadian librarians across all sectors, arguing for the ongoing importance of information literacy and the need for policy development to support efforts to enhance citizen information literacy.

What is Information Literacy?

The concept "information literacy" needs little introduction to most academic and school librarians but is likely less familiar to librarians working in other sectors. The American Library Association (ALA) offers a definition of information literacy that has found widespread favour among North American academic librarians, and its influence is also felt in many other parts of the world. ALA states that "to be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) further delineated the concept with the publication of their widely cited *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* comprised of the following standards and supplemented by detailed performance indicators and outcomes:

1. The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed.
2. The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.
3. The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.
4. The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.
5. The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally. (Association of College and Research Libraries)

ACRL's five information literacy competency standards guide the instructional practices of many librarians; they offer a building block approach that can be easily adapted and are clearly articulated in terms accessible to those both within and outside of the library and information studies (LIS) profession. They are not, however, without their detractors, as they have increasingly come to be viewed

as an over-simplification of complex cognitive processes (Budd; Webber and Johnston). This frustration has led to interest in "critical information literacy," a movement advocating that:

> We should understand literacy as more than a set of competencies; more than simply the ability to read and write. Instead of conceptualizing literacy as a "neutral, discrete, context-free skill" (Norgaard, 2003), something that can be measured by a universally-applicable set of standards, critical literacy scholars recognize literacy as a culturally-situated phenomenon, embedded within specific social, political, and economic systems, subject to (and potentially constitutive of) the power relations and ideologies that define particular moments in history (Luke & Kapitzke, 1999; Norgaard, 2003). (Accardi, Drabinksi, and Kumbier xi)

Critical information literacy also rejects the insularity of past definitions of information literacy and instead engages with theoretical perspectives across disciplines (Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier's book provides many examples). Critical information literacy, however, is at this point largely an approach found in the scholarly literature; most librarians seem reluctant to abandon the ACRL's concrete skills model in favour of a more complex and holistic vision of information engagement.

Although Canadian academic librarians, lacking their own information literacy definition and other supporting documents, rely most heavily on the American work on this topic, other jurisdictions have also put considerable efforts into defining information literacy. In the United Kingdom, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals defines information literacy as "knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner" and goes on to outline eight skills that are strikingly similar to those outlined by the American Library Association. The Australian Library and Information Association takes quite a different approach in its *Statement on Information Literacy for All Australians*, working from the principle that "A thriving national and global culture, economy and democracy will best be advanced by people who are empowered in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals" and going on to assert that information literacy contributes to:

- learning for life;
- the creation of new knowledge;
- acquisition of skills;
- personal, vocational, corporate and organisational empowerment;
- social inclusion;

- participative citizenship; and
- innovation and enterprise. (Australian Library and Information Association)

The Australian statement is unique in that, rather than focusing on the acquisition of specific skills, it ties information literacy to the many facets of life enhanced by its presence.

An intriguing line of thought about information literacy from Sturges and Gastinger may offer another means of defining information literacy that broadens the concept in a way that is useful across all sectors and particularly valuable in engaging public libraries. They suggest starting with Article Nineteen of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, contending that "starting from a human rights perspective leads towards a strong, inclusive interpretation of Information Literacy" (Sturges and Gastinger 195). Article Nineteen states that:

> Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. (UN General Assembly)

It is, in fact, this broader sense of information literacy as a human right that underpins the most successful attempts at policy development. These include multinational consensus-building meetings organized by UNESCO and IFLA resulting in policy documents such as the Prague Declaration (Thompson) and the Alexandria Proclamation (Garner) as well as national policy development initiatives like the Scottish Information Literacy Project (Irving and Crawford). The understanding of information literacy at the root of these documents has much in common with critical information literacy in that they reflect a social justice perspective that transcends discipline and rejects instrumentalist ideologies. For now, it should suffice to note that the first step in information literacy policy development in Canada will be agreeing on a definition of the concept and that, in addition to having the greatest success in underpinning policy development in other jurisdictions, broader, rights-based definitions may well have the most potential to engage librarians and stakeholders across sectors.

Information Literacy and the Other "Literacies"

Advocacy and policy-making for information literacy must also take into consideration the proliferation of other "literacies," including "digital literacy," "web literacy," "media literacy," "e-literacy," and others that are generating discussion in some circles (Bawden; Belshaw). The definitions and boundaries of these terms lack consensus and appear to be interpreted somewhat differently by each scholar or activist group engaged with them. In general, it can be said that most definitions of these literacies require more than simple task and tool competencies, requiring an ability to *critically* engage with the entity in question (digital, web, media) for one's own (and in some cases, society's) betterment. In this way, they are similar to notions of information literacy held dear by librarians who, at least ideally, want citizens to move beyond tool use to deeper understanding and reflection on the nature and use of information. These literacies do, however, by their very names (whether "digital," "web," or "e-"), all

privilege modern technology as integral to the desired literacy in a way that information literacy does not. The term "information literacy," perhaps simply because it pre-dates many of the technological innovations highlighted in the other literacies, transcends medium of delivery. Thus, it could be viewed as a broader concept that certainly includes but isn't limited to literacy with information in digital formats. It instead includes literacy with infinite other information mediums, including traditional print, untraditional sources (Lloyd, for example, focuses on sociocultural practices in the workplace), and future means of engaging with information not yet possible to imagine. Belshaw argues for "considering a plurality of digital *literacies*" to "avoid some of the problems of endlessly-redefining 'digital literacy'" (4), and perhaps his advice should be expanded to include a "plurality" of not just "digital" but other related literacies as well (whether under the term information literacies, or some other) in order to bring together proponents of different literacies, consolidating rather than splintering the voices advocating for the importance of these literacies and related policy development.

The issue of "information technology (IT) literacy" or "information and communications technology (ICT) literacy" warrants additional attention, as it is a concept that is often entwined and confused with information literacy. Town calls the term "ICT literacy" a "particularly unfortunate elision," noting that "ICT (information and communications technology) literacy appears to imply inclusion of information literacy but is in fact only a synonym for IT (or computer) literacy" whose use "obscure[s] the fact that information literacy is a well-developed concept separate from IT (information technology) literacy" (53). To some extent this misconception is understandable; so much of our modern information access and use involves technology that the tools themselves become the focus of attention. This equating of the two concepts is particularly evident in policy development, where information literacy and IT literacy are often conflated under the "ICT" umbrella (Pejova, Catts, Tichá, and Dombrovská). As we shall see later, this focus on ICT literacy has certainly characterized many Canadian policy efforts to date, to the detriment of information literacy. This narrow focus falls short; the ability to manipulate specific hardware and software is important but fails to prepare Canadians to critically engage with information to meet lifelong needs.

Why is Information Literacy Important?

Librarians are unlikely to need convincing of the need for and desirability of an information literate population, but a brief review does confirm that the issue has relevance outside of the LIS profession. The most obvious factor necessitating the need for information literacy is the sheer volume of information available and the complexity of its delivery mechanisms. The ubiquity of access to information over the Internet, increasingly through smart phones and tablets, is so obvious as to scarcely warrant mention. The regular emergence of new online information tools and resources, and the difficulty inherent in understanding and situating use

of these, is certainly another factor necessitating a high degree of information literacy. Additionally, the vast majority of information now available lacks external quality control and is not produced or regulated in a standardized manner, increasing the onus on the information consumer to make informed choices about the information they use.

Perhaps even more useful than listing the inputs and circumstances necessitating high levels of information literacy is a consideration of the personal, economic, and social outcomes that can be better realized by information literate individuals and communities (Pejova, Catts, Tichá, and Dombrovská). Personal outcomes are perhaps the most immediate and frequently cited benefits of high information literacy levels, with economic and social outcomes, while no less important, taking time and critical mass to become evident. An example of the immediacy of personal benefits arising from enhanced information literacy skills is the student who, having learned how to search a database of scholarly literature and correctly cite sources, performs better on academic assignments than would otherwise have been possible (Larkin and Pines; Julien and Boon). The personal outcomes associated with high information literacy levels continue to be realized in lifelong learning, equipping citizens with the ability to meet the changing information needs arising throughout their lives (Correia). Another personal outcome associated with information literacy is the ability to make informed health care decisions based on reliable information. Studies have shown that personal searches for health information have a significant impact on patients' health self-management practices (Fox and Rainie; Millard and Fintak). Personal benefits resulting from high information literacy levels are numerous and the most widely touted reasons for improving information literacy levels.

Improved national economic outcomes, while taking longer to manifest themselves, are also related to information literacy levels. Pejova, Catts, Tichá, and Dombrovská go so far as to claim that a "nation's positioning in the global economy is increasingly tied to the quality and quantity of information literacy among its citizens" (1). It is perhaps a truism in the twenty-first century to mention that Canada and most developed countries have shifted from a manufacturing-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, a fact noted by the Government of Canada as far back as 1997 (Gera and Mang). Central to a nation's economic well-being is its ability to generate and manage knowledge and, by extension, the information that forms the basis of this knowledge. Numerous studies have been conducted about the role of information in the workplace, regardless of sector. A 2004 survey of 600 US workplaces in four sectors—government, financial services, manufacturing, and healthcare—found that workers spent "roughly a quarter of their time searching for information and another quarter analyzing it" (Feldman et al. 4). Stakes are high in the information-intensive workplace, and failure to successfully manage information can have dire consequences. Lawsuits have been launched for failure to obtain required information (Ebbinghouse); patients have died (Steinbrook), and space shuttles have been destroyed (Fisher and Kingma) from substandard information practices. Innovation, too, seems to be tied to the use of information (Makri and

Warwick; Taragola, Van Huylenbroeck, Van Lierde; Citrin, Lee, and McCullough) in a wide range of sectors. Information and the capacity to manage it are clearly central to today's knowledge-based economy. As early as 1996, the OECD recognized that participation in the knowledge and information economy was the essential predictor of national economic success and acknowledged the importance of "[c]apabilities for selecting relevant and disregarding irrelevant information, recognising patterns in information, interpreting and decoding information" (Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development 13).

In addition to contributing to national economic well-being, high information literacy levels also contribute to enhanced social outcomes. Correia and Virkus have both argued that the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information is essential to informed political participation and civic engagement—important elements in any democracy. Representation of the largest number and diversity of voices is the best way to ensure that elected officials and their policies meet the needs of the entire population. Low political participation levels among already marginalized segments of the population—the poor, First Nations people, recent immigrants (Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté; Fournier and Loewen)—whether attributable to low information literacy levels or other causes, result in the exclusion of their needs from the political and policy-making environment—the very arena where decisions can be made to improve the quality of their lives.

Political scientist Henry Milner adopts the term "civic literacy" to describe the "knowledge and ability capacity of citizens to make sense of their political world" (1). His descriptions of civic literacy overlap with many of the tenets of information literacy as described by the LIS profession, and he makes a convincing case that voter turnout levels are the best objective indicators of a population's civic literacy levels. If one accepts Milner's equating of voting and civic literacy levels, this then points to a particularly worrying situation in Canada. Voter turnout in the last federal election was 61.1% (Elections Canada), and this number dwarfs turnout rates in civic elections where, as an example, the recent civic election in Regina, billed as hotly contested because several incumbents, including the mayor, were not seeking re-election, saw a voter turnout of just 33% (Graney). These numbers reveal that there is clearly room for improvement in Canada's voter turnout and, by extension, civic literacy levels. Milner goes on to note that "a country's level of civic literacy is an indication of the efficacy of its political knowledge-enhancing institutions" (55), by extension suggesting that there may be room for improvement of such institutions in Canada. In particular, he highlights adult education and lifelong learning programs as the most important determinants of civic literacy in any population, writing of the importance of "the reinforcement of literacy habits acquired at school after formal schooling has been completed" through "policies designed to encourage adults to acquire and use information especially through participation in adult education" (121). Although he does not use the term "information literacy," this statement reads, in essence, as a call for policies to improve information literacy levels in order to enhance civic literacy, boost informed political participation rates, and ultimately enhance social outcomes.

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Information literacy is also a central component in the creation of alternatives to existing political and civic structures. Thriving civic organizations and mobilization of grassroots movements require, at their most basic level, the ability to analyze existing information to identify problems, develop clear position statements supported by evidence, formulate key issues for a target audience, and the ability to effectively use multiple channels to disseminate key messages and calls to action. In addition to the high information literacy levels of grassroots organizers, the target population also needs the ability to access the messages being conveyed and analyze them in the context of other available information in order to assess their validity. In her article, "The New Social Media and the Arab Spring," Natana J. DeLong-Bas addresses both the opportunities and risks posed by information collection, analysis and dissemination. She credits these processes as being integral to transformative movements like the Arab Spring but also highlights the dangers of new methods of information dissemination as carrying

> the inherent danger of being used to perpetuate sectarianism, tribalism, regionalism, racism, sexism, and discrimination through the proliferation of extremist or exclusionary content. It must be recalled that Facebook is not the private domain of 'enlightened' values or democratic ideals. The reality of an open source is that it is open to everyone and anyone who cares to access and comment on it, whether constructively or destructively. Thus, there is the potential for both democratic change and retrograde reactionism that can have serious political and economic repercussions, and for both building and fracturing social cohesion. (DeLong-Bas)

Information literacy levels are clearly a component in determining which information is acted upon and which is rejected, both by individuals and, by extension, larger community groups.

Closer to home, the Idle No More movement illustrates many points about both the power of information and the associated need for an information literate population. Idle No More is an activist movement initiated by First Nations people to advocate for "indigenous sovereignty, cultural respect, and the rights of all Canadians to a healthy environment" (Schulz). As is evidenced on the movement's web site, organizers compiled many resources and synthesized information from a wide range of sources to develop their message; they then used various information and communications technologies in an attempt to mobilize a previously marginalized group. Digital public affairs strategist Mark Blevis, commenting on the marked decline in social media interest in the movement in a relatively short time period, noted that while "it's unclear whether social media has failed to actually educate people as to the cause at hand . . . . a movement like Idle No More has to work harder to figure out how to communicate their concerns to the public" (Canadian Press). Idle No More's target audiences (initially First Nations people but also other Canadians) then needed information literacy skills to assess the movement's claims with respect to aboriginal rights, environmental issues, and omnibus budget practices. Further demands were

placed on Canadians' information literacy levels when the Government of Canada released an auditor's report (Deloitte and Touche LLP) criticizing the financial practices of Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence whose hunger strike had made her the symbolic leader of the Idle No More movement. Canadians were left with the responsibility to negotiate complex and, at times, contradictory information to reach informed conclusions about the movement and the government response. Evidence suggests that citizens need help with meeting these demands; in addition to polling results reporting that "Canadians remain confused by. . . ongoing aboriginal efforts to improve the relationship between First Nations and the rest of Canada" (Canadian Press) are anecdotal reports such as that of Teaching for Change advisor Enid Lee who found that Cree and Ojibwe students in Manitoba were unaware of the movement and even confused it with the television program *American Idol* ("Location of Self and Students"). High levels of information literacy are essential in order to access, evaluate, and respond to complex information in such cases; information literacy transcends the individual to shape social discourse in our country.

Whose Responsibility is Information Literacy?

To date, information literacy has primarily been seen as the purview of university and college libraries, with some activity in school libraries and much less in public and special libraries. There are likely many reasons for this: Julien and Breu's survey of Canadian public libraries found that, while approximately 85% of public librarians viewed instructional programs as among their responsibilities, resource limitations (staff, time, teaching skills) restricted their ability to offer this training. Pia Russell attributed the inconsistent and ad hoc state of information literacy instruction in Ontario's school libraries to inadequate policies and declining school libraries. Crawford offers additional reasons why information literacy instruction is largely situated in postsecondary settings, pointing out that academic librarians often have greater resources at their disposal and are more likely to have access to funds for conducting information literacy research (257-8). As well, in contrast to other library sectors, many academic librarians work in environments where research is integral to career advancement. The prevalence of information literacy programs in higher education has also become somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy; as more attention is devoted to the topic, more guidelines and resources are developed, enabling even greater uptake among academic libraries. The concentration of information literacy efforts in higher education settings necessarily limits the segment of the population presented with the opportunity to develop these abilities, as only 22% of Canadians aged fifteen and over hold university degrees (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada). Clearly then, limiting information literacy education to postsecondary environments will fail to reach much of the population and may come too late for those who do receive it as they will likely have struggled with many information issues (whether it be seeking reliable health information, deciding on a career, managing their online presence, or infinite other possibilities) before reaching higher education. Elementary and secondary

school, as mandatory levels of education, must ensure that students achieve sufficient information literacy levels to allow them to meet their life goals. The CSLP ISIS-21 Project, a grant-funded pilot program from Concordia University's Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance aiming to develop inquiry and information literacy skills among children and teens in Quebec, may be an indication that recognition of the importance of information literacy development at the elementary and secondary levels is spreading beyond librarians to funders and other academics (Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance). Public libraries should supplement efforts in schools and postsecondary settings and can be central to developing higher levels of information literacy required for lifelong learning. Special libraries have a role to play in helping employees develop, maintain, and expand on the specific information literacies required by their workplaces or professions. Models for integration of information literacy education efforts across sectors are available from other jurisdictions such as Scotland (Irving and Crawford) and could serve as a starting point for such work in Canada. Information literacy levels in Canadian society will only increase if all library sectors are engaged and a coherent framework is developed and agreed upon to guide this work.

This isn't to suggest that librarians will be the only players in developing this information literacy framework; they will certainly be central to it and may even be leaders in it, but the issue is too large and pervasive to belong to only one profession. It may in fact be that widespread recognition of the importance of information literacy has been impeded by the fact that discussion and dissemination of the concept has been limited to academic librarians and small segments of the larger educational environment. There are likely many reasons for the failure of information literacy to emerge as an issue in the broader collective consciousness, but academic librarians should carefully consider whether their own practices, including insistent use of their own terminology rather than that of target groups (Weetman DaCosta) and their insistence on limiting publications and presentations about information literacy almost exclusively to LIS venues, contribute to, or at least fail to act against, the marginalization of the concept. These practices are self-defeating in terms of efforts to gain wider recognition of the importance of information literacy. As Crawford, a leader in the National Information Literacy Framework Scotland, points out, "information literacy as a concept loses its authority when it moves outside the information world, which raises the issue of targeting stakeholder groups who are likely to be sympathetic to the concept" (258). Reaching out to others with an interest in information literacy strengthens initiatives, helps to align disparate groups that may be striving to similar ends, albeit under other names, and raises the profile of information literacy. Only then will information literacy truly extend its reach and permeate everything from "career choice and management, employability training, skills development, workplace decision making, adult literacies training and community learning and development, scholastic education, lifelong learning, and health and media literacies" (Crawford 258).

The Need for Policy Development

It is an often-forgotten fact that Paul Zurkowski, who, as President of the Information Industry Association, coined the term "information literacy" in 1974, first used the phrase in calling for policy development in the United States. He advised that "the top priority of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science [a US government agency that has subsequently become part of the Institute of Museum and Library Services] should be directed toward establishing a major national program to achieve universal information literacy by 1984" (27). After almost forty years without the establishment of such a program in most countries, including Canada, it is perhaps necessary to ask if such national policies and programs are still warranted.

The consensus, despite the passing of decades, seems to be that yes, national information literacy policies and programs are still needed, and perhaps more so than ever before. Some, like Shigeru Aoyagi, Chief of the Literacy and Non-Formal Education Section of UNESCO, have spoken broadly about the ongoing importance of information literacy, stating that "It is clear . . . that for all societies information literacy is becoming [an] increasingly important component of not only literacy policies and strategies, but also of broader policies and strategies to promote human development" (qtd. in Thompson 23). This was reiterated in the 2012 Moscow Declaration on Media and Information Literacy which arose from an IFLA and UNESCO sponsored conference and calls for the integration of media and information literacy in "national educational, cultural, information, media and other policies" (Moscow Declaration on Media and Information Literacy, 3).

Other authors have been more specific in arguing for the ongoing (and increasing) need for information literacy policy development. Basili argues that the "information literacy problem is greater today than in the 1970s in each of its dimensions: scale, target, matter, and results" (398). She contends that the scale of the problem is so large that it requires mass intervention and support to reach a target population that extends beyond library users to all members of society. The matter, or information, to be navigated has expanded beyond traditional scholarly publication to all types of information in all formats, and the results needed are a comprehensive level of information literacy that extends beyond searching for materials to include "information analysis, evaluation, synthesis, and communication" (Basili 398). Joint and Wallis note that efforts at information literacy policy development may be viewed by some as unnecessary bureaucratization, but they and others (Basili; Weiner; Virkus) ultimately contend that policy development is the most effective way of advancing the information literacy agenda.

The small number and relative newness of national information literacy policies means that evidence of their impact on citizen information literacy levels has just begun to emerge. Additionally, quantification of the impact of national information literacy policy on citizen information literacy levels is complex because it is

difficult to synthesize results from the disparate initiatives prompted and supported by the policy. Wales is addressing this need to demonstrate impact of the policy by collecting dozens of cases of policy-prompted information literacy initiatives (Welsh Information Literacy Project) which, when regarded together, show improved information literacy levels among thousands of the country's residents. Examples include the "Gateways to Learning" project component of the Welsh National Information Literacy Project which saw 56 branch and campus libraries and learning resource centres collaborate to offer non-accredited and accredited information literacy training in communities hit by high unemployment after the closure of a major steel plant. The project worked with 2,300 people; over 600 achieved formal information literacy qualifications, and many were spurred on to further postsecondary studies ("Gateways to Learning"). National information literacy policy development is starting to generate the evidence needed to ensure that information literacy receives the political, financial, and human resources necessary to realize the vision of an information literate society. And while several authors have issued cautions to be heeded in national policy development, such as Whitworth's warning about "instrumentally progressivist" policies (313) and Pilerot and Lindberg's concern about imperialism and oppression, none of these authors suggest that these issues make national policy development untenable. Instead, they emphasize the need for it to be carefully undertaken with a "nuanced and flexible conceptualization" (Pilerot and Lindberg 357) of information literacy. Even Haras and Brasley, who pose the fundamental question of whether information literacy is policy-worthy and note the substantial hurdles ahead, conclude their article on a positive note with recommendations for advancing information literacy on the policy agenda, thereby suggesting that information literacy, even if not entirely policy-worthy at this point, certainly can become so.

Information Literacy Education in Canada Today

There should be no mistaking the fact that Canadian librarians (particularly academic and school librarians) have worked hard to promote and foster information literacy in their target populations. Even a quick review of the library literature reveals numerous Canadian firsts and successes in information literacy education, and academic library web sites show that many innovations and much hard work are taking place across the country (Canadian Association of College and University Libraries; Association of College and Research Libraries, *Goebel and Anderson*). There are also some reports of successful integration of information literacy into the curriculum of specific programs and, rarer still, there are instances of institution-wide information literacy integration and policy development (Polkinghorne and Wilton; Reed, Kinder, and Farnum; Demczuk, Gottschalk, and Littleford). Clearly, though, the most common refrain to emerge from the literature and discussions with academic librarians is lamentation over the prevalence of "one-shot" library instruction sessions (Jacobs and Jacobs; Mery, Newby, Peng). In these sessions, the librarian is parachuted in for a single, fast-paced session with students without any way of knowing if individual

students have received prior instruction and with little time to conduct an assessment to find out. The concept of "information literacy" is glossed over, if mentioned at all, in the face of a need to communicate essential information in a very short time frame. This ad hoc approach to library instruction (there is scarcely opportunity to develop any meaningful attempt at information literacy) is time-consuming and frustrating for librarians, who feel stymied in their attempts to engage students in deep and meaningful information work. Ultimately, it is students who suffer most; they may hear basic information again and again but never move beyond it to develop the information skills that would assist their studies and enrich their lives.

The relative lack of cohesive, widespread information literacy plans and policies in the postsecondary environment, where it receives the greatest attention and resources, is magnified many times over when one looks outside of academia. Public libraries in Canada have been viewed in past government policy (for example, *Connecting Canadians* and *CAP—the Community Access Program*, both discussed below) as an integral part of ICT infrastructure, but the lack of information literacy policy means that the role of public libraries in information literacy is unclear and inconsistent (Julien and Breu 284-6). This is not to suggest that public librarians haven't done much work in this area, albeit often under different names: like net safety, freedom to read, etc. School librarians, too, have also made considerable efforts to develop information literacy abilities in students with, as Russell found, varying degrees of success that can be attributed to differences in policies and their unequal implementation. Much of this work has happened in spite of challenging circumstances, including reductions to the number of libraries and librarians (particularly in schools), exponential technological change, competing demands, changing pedagogical practices, and the political realities of working with others, including administrators, teachers, and school/library boards.

The above paragraphs demonstrate the fragmentation *within* various library sectors, and cohesive strategies *among* the sectors are even rarer and more challenging. There are isolated efforts to bridge the information gap students experience between high school and university (Hayden) and some instances of cooperation between universities and specific professions to smooth transitions, but again, these are relatively rare exceptions. Former ALA President Jim Rettig wrote eloquently of a "library ecosystem":

> I think of our school, public, academic, and other types of libraries as part of an integrated library ecosystem. If one part of the system suffers, the entire system is threatened and suffers. Libraries offer incredible lifelong learning environments. No one type of library can deliver learning opportunities from cradle to grave. But through our library ecosystem we offer these opportunities in abundance. (Rettig)

Canada needs large-scale policy directives, planning, and resources to enable the "library ecosystem" and many other partners and stakeholders to promote

and foster information literacy among its citizens. Without this, Canada will not see "the cultural shift that is required to implement information literacy at a deeper, enterprise-wide level" (Gibson 24).

Canadian Information Literacy Policy Development to Date

In 2003, Hannelore Rader noted, with respect to information policy development in Canada, that "although some progress has been made during the past five years, much more is needed compared with efforts in the USA and Australia" (39). Her statement remains true today, and Canada might even be regarded as further behind, given the significant information literacy policy developments in several European countries. The following discussion of policy development efforts in Canada is organized around the four major arenas where, based on developments in other countries, one would expect such activity to take place: the federal government, provincial governments, library associations, and other related interest groups.

Government of Canada

There is no centralized department serving as a hub for information literacy-related initiatives in the Government of Canada's current structure. Relevant policies and documents have emerged from a range of federal government departments, including Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (and its previous iterations), Industry Canada, as well as arms-length advice-giving bodies like the Information Highway Advisory Council and independent but largely government-funded bodies like Canada's Advanced Research and Innovation Network (CANARIE). The result is a difficult maze of policies that in some cases hint at information literacy but no centralized departmental location and hence no focused discussion of the issue. An overview of some of the more salient documents is provided here to give insight into the priorities and directions adopted by departments within the Government of Canada.

The Government of Canada was an early international leader in information *technology* policy development, with an emphasis on ensuring that the infrastructure was in place to allow maximum citizen access to the Internet. *Connecting Canadians* was a high profile federal policy initiative, emerging in the mid-1990s from Industry Canada, based on advice from the Information Highway Advisory Council. The broad *Connecting Canadians* programs had multiple goals related to information technology, including expanding Canadians' access to the Internet, increasing Canadian content online, making government services accessible on the Internet, and fostering e-commerce (Longford and Moll 491-2). One component of *Connecting Canadians*, familiar to many librarians, was the *Community Access Program (CAP)* which, from 1995-2012, aimed to provide computers and Internet access for Canadians across the country. Community centres, schools and libraries were equipped with the technology required to bridge the digital divide among Canadians, resulting in the creation of more than 10,000 CAP sites across Canada (Julien and Breau 283). In addition to

infrastructure, *Connecting Canadians* also placed responsibility for providing training in the use of the technology with CAP sites, although no additional funds were provided for achieving this objective. It appears, as might be expected given a mandate to provide primarily *technology* training, as well as the scarcity of resources, that the CAP program, despite its many benefits, did not translate into increased information literacy competencies. Julien and Breau's study confirmed this, finding that while many public libraries saw a role for themselves in boosting information literacy levels among Canadians, resource limitations prevented them from doing so. *Connecting Canadians* and its component programs had a significant impact on connectivity of Canadian libraries but did not have a measureable impact on information literacy levels.

Canada's *Innovation Strategy*, released in 2002, consisted of two parts. The first was prepared by Industry Canada and the second, titled *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians*, was prepared by Human Resource Development Canada. Both parts of the *Innovation Strategy* document affirm the central role of knowledge in innovation in all sectors and the need to have a highly educated population in order to innovate in an internationally competitive manner. The second part of the report, as its title suggests, focused more heavily on how the Government of Canada, and Canadians themselves, could develop the skills required by the knowledge economy. Technical skills are highlighted, such as the goal that "all young Canadians are computer and Internet literate by grade school graduation" (Human Resource Development Canada 23), but there is no attention paid to the accompanying cognitive skills required to be information literate. Lifelong learning is deemed to be paramount, but there is no mention of the information literacy concept—by that or any other name.

More recently, several reports and policy documents from the Government of Canada have shifted the focus, or at least their terminology, to focus on "digital" skills. Examples include "Consultation Paper: Improving Canada's Digital Advantage*,*" which reported research collected to support the preparation of Canada's Digital Economy Strategy currently in development. However, although this document defines digital skills as "the ability to locate, organize, understand, evaluate, create and share information using digital technology" ("Consultation Paper*"*), it then goes on to focus largely on skill development in the ICT sector rather than wider society. Despite the definition of "digital skills" included in the document, it seems that the focus, at least in the "Consultation Paper," is on technology skills; it will be interesting to see if the long-awaited Digital Economy Strategy will expand on this when it is published.

A recent encouraging development at the federal level is the 2011 report: *Defining Essential Digital Skills in the Canadian Workplace: Final Report*, written by Chinien and Boutin on behalf of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. This report is promising because it acknowledges information skills (as opposed to just information technology) in a way not seen in previous Government of Canada documents:

…people have gradually realized that working with digital systems and tools to perform most job tasks involve complex cognitive and metacognitive skills, over and above the basic ICT skills necessary for operating a computer. Concerns about the digital divide are now shifting to the digital-skills divide and to the cognitive skills divide. In spite of the widespread interest in digital skill, it is still an underdeveloped and under conceptualized concept which need the illumination of sound research. (Chinien & Boutin 7)

In this way, the report is a good starting point for such discussions in Canada and could certainly inform components of national information literacy policy, which would need to include not only the workplace but also other arenas (K-12 education, postsecondary education, lifelong learning needs). Additionally, while digital literacy would certainly be a central component of a national information literacy policy, a comprehensive national framework would need to include information in other, non-digital forms, as well. The undesirability of limiting workplace information skills to only digital resources was made clear in a 2013 Project Information Literacy report in which employers were frustrated by new graduates' inability to incorporate other, off-line sources into their search for information (Head).

Another encouraging development is the essential skills list developed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills. Several capabilities commonly incorporated under the umbrella term "information literacy" are included, although that specific term is not used. Essential skills particularly pertinent to this paper include the ability to "analyze and synthesize information from multiple sources or from complex and lengthy texts," "finding, understanding or entering information in various types of documents," and "finding and evaluating information to make rational decisions or to organize work" (Office of Literacy and Essential Skills). The Office does make some useful resources available and promotes inclusion of essential skills in existing workplace training programs. While the Government of Canada clearly lacks national information literacy policies or frameworks, there are pockets of activity and potential partners within the federal government that could contribute to the development and realization of information literacy policy development in Canada.

Provincial and Territorial Governments

Information literacy policy development in Canada is undoubtedly complicated by the fact that the Canadian Constitution assigns responsibility for education to provincial and territorial governments. The lack of a federal role in education results in wide variations in the attention paid to information literacy among the province and territories; however, while this certainly poses challenges, the issue is too important for this to be regarded as an insurmountable problem. No province currently has a comprehensive information literacy policy or framework, but there are several relevant initiatives underway in some jurisdictions. These

are worth reviewing before moving to a discussion of mechanisms by which coordination of provincial/territorial information literacy activities might be achieved.

The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8: Language; The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 and 10: English; and The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 and 12: English include "media literacy" (grades 1–8) or "media studies" (grades 9–12) as one of the four core strands in the curriculum. Media literacy is defined in the documents as the ability to engage with "media texts," a term described so broadly as to be virtually synonymous with the LIS profession's understanding of information literacy:

> Media texts can be understood to include any work, object, or event that communicates meaning to an audience. Most media texts use words, graphics, sounds, and/or images, in print, oral, visual, or electronic form, to communicate information and ideas to their audience. (Ontario Ministry of Education, *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8: Language* 13)

Media literacy seems to hold a prime place in Ontario curriculum documents, although there may be cause for concern about how effectively media/information literacy goals are being realized. The curriculum documents specify that "The school library program plays a key role in the development of information literacy and research skills" (Ontario Ministry of Education, *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8: Language* 30), but cuts to school libraries and teacher-librarian positions must surely jeopardize this; only 56% of Ontario school libraries have a teacher-librarian, and 80% of these are part-time (Ontario School Library Association 1). Policy is only effective in so far as resource allocation allows it to be enacted.

Relevant work is also underway on Ontario's postsecondary environment. In 2007, the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV) issued the latest version of the *Guidelines for University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations* which outlines expectations for Bachelor's and Honours Bachelor's degrees. Several of the expectations relate to information literacy: most explicitly, an "ability to gather, review, evaluate and interpret information relevant to one or more of the major fields in a discipline" (Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents 1). This document has also formed the basis for the development of institution or program-specific expectations at many Ontario universities. Academic librarians in the province have done considerable work to highlight the connections between the degree expectations and information literacy; Sloniowski and Adam, for example, have mapped the OCAV expectations to the Association of College and Research Libraries' Information Literacy *Competency Standards for Higher Education*. This is another example of sector-specific work that could form a crucial element of a "cradle-to-grave" information literacy framework.

Manitoba serves as an example of a province where the failure to explicitly situate information literacy in the curriculum is somewhat problematic for educational efforts. Robinson notes that information literacy and inquiry-based learning are "lumped into the suggestions for instruction" (31) in various subjects but are not clearly articulated or associated with learning outcomes of their own. This makes it difficult to assess if, and to what degree, information literacy skills are developed throughout the educational process. The document with the closest potential alignment with information literacy objectives, Literacy with ICT Continuum, also fails to outline specific outcomes, resulting in a lack of "any suggestions for ways to integrate the continuum, or teach and assess the skills and knowledge associated with it," opening up the real possibility "for teachers to overlook the importance of information literacy" (Robinson 33).

One particularly interesting example of provincial information literacy policy development is that found in Atlantic Canada. Curriculum development, including a robust emphasis on information literacy, extends beyond the boundaries of individual provinces to a regional effort. The Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum, composed of a series of documents that govern K–12 education in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador, offers a model program which outlines a very rigorous information literacy curriculum for students from kindergarten right through to high school graduation while also demonstrating the potential for inter-provincial cooperation (Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English Arts Curriculum). One assumes that Atlantic Canada graduates will have achieved the many information literacy competencies outlined throughout the document, but future studies demonstrating population-level impact on citizen information literacy levels would provide valuable evidence in support of a national framework.

These examples obviously don't represent all ten provinces and three territories, but they are illustrative of general trends and issues emerging in provincial treatment of information literacy. Information literacy policy exists in some provincial education ministries, but it isn't ubiquitous. Even in instances where information literacy is enshrined in policy documents, it is often under-resourced to the point of limiting implementation of the policy. As well, given the dearth of information literacy policies outside the K–12 sector, the K–12 policies exist in isolation and fail to connect with lifelong information needs, preventing a comprehensive and lifelong view of information literacy. One of the most promising avenues for advancing information literacy policy development in Canada (particularly in the context of provincial education portfolios) may be through the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), of which all provinces and territories are members. CMEC is a venue for provincial and territorial ministers of education to share information and resources and to develop and advance a nationwide education agenda. CMEC is currently involved in administering the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) which focuses on ICT skills but has not done information literacy policy development work to date. CMEC's web site explains the organization's purpose as:

- a forum to discuss policy issues;
- a mechanism through which to undertake activities, projects, and initiatives in areas of mutual interest;
- a means by which to consult and cooperate with national education organizations and the federal government. (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada)

These priorities clearly align with the types of action required to advance information literacy policy development in Canada.

Canadian Library Associations

Canadian library associations (with the notable exception of the school library sector) have largely been absent from attempts to promote information literacy policy development. The Canadian Library Association passed a resolution at its 2005 Annual General Meeting about information literacy: "Be it resolved that the CLA include Information Literacy in its priorities, and commit to advocating for the importance of information literacy with appropriate national and regional associations/institutions" (Canadian Library Association), but there is little evidence that this resulted in any action. CLA's decision to dissolve divisions and interest groups in 2011 resulted in the disbanding of the Information Literacy Interest Group. It has yet to be replaced by a similarly focused network (the new model for professional units), so there is currently no central professional arena for cross-sector discussions of information literacy.

The Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) represents the academic library sector, and one of its major goals is to influence federal government policy. Unfortunately, information literacy is not identified on the organization's web site as an area for policy work and advocacy (Canadian Association of Research Libraries). An earlier CARL Information Literacy Working Group did create a wiki called "Canadian Research Libraries Information Literacy Portal" with some useful information, but updating of content was turned over to Canadian instruction librarians and has faltered without ongoing association involvement; the last update was in 2009 (*Canadian Research Libraries Information Literacy Portal*). Other than the Workshop for Instruction in Library Use (WILU), an annual library instruction conference organized each year by a different institution, academic librarians do not have a venue for information literacy discussions or policy work. There is much information literacy work going on in academic libraries in Canada, but it is largely carried out in institutional isolation, forcing Canadian librarians to look to the US for guiding documents and an information literacy community.

Exceptions to the relative silence of Canadian library associations on the topic of information literacy can be found in school library associations, both provincial and national. In 2003, the Canadian Association for School Libraries published *Achieving Information Literacy: Standards for School Library Programs in Canada.* This document outlines eight information literacy outcomes and multiple

indicators to guide the development and delivery of school information literacy programs. Although it also talks about the importance of information literate citizens, it is most certainly a sector-specific document rather than a more comprehensive information literacy framework because of its exclusive focus on schools. One outstanding quality of the document is that it goes beyond outlining desired information literacy outcomes by making explicit connections between the ability to achieve these outcomes and the availability of appropriate resources (staff, facility, collection, budget, ICT, etc.). As with various federal policies and documents, *Achieving Information Literacy* could make a valuable contribution to the development of a comprehensive national information literary framework, and its authors would be valuable collaborative partners. Another exciting initiative emerging from the school library sector is the work by Voices for School Libraries Network, affiliated with the Canadian Library Association, on the *National Standards for School Libraries in Canada Project*. This collaborative effort by school librarians and stakeholders across the country includes "literacy to engage lifelong learners" among its principles (Voices for School Libraries Network). The project is scheduled to run 2013–2014, and its results, along with its method of collaborative creation could inform future work that engages other sectors.

Other Groups

Several other non-library associations and groups have developed policies or documents that, while not focusing exclusively on information literacy, devote considerable attention to related issues. Some of these include non-profit charitable organizations like MediaSmarts: Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy (formerly the Media Awareness Network) as well as teachers' federations, literacy groups, researchers, and others. The Information and Communications Technology Council is an example of a non-library group that has published a particularly interesting document, *Digital Literacy: Canada's Productivity Opportunity*. It reads as a call for collaborative action that "has been created to engage organizations concerned with Canada's prosperity, in the subject of Digital Literacy" (Information and Communications Technology Council 2). Other than narrowing their focus to only digital information, they share a sense of the urgent need for policy development and leadership: "It is imperative for Canada to address Digital Literacy through government-sponsored initiatives to not only improve productivity at a national, organizational and business level, but to extend social and personal benefits to all Canadian citizens" (Information Communications Technology Council 7). The document goes on to identify potential partners than can help to realize their vision for digital literacy development; it is concerning that libraries and/or their associations are not listed as potential collaborators and suggests that, unless Canadian librarians join the conversation, they run the risk of being left behind in this important work.

Conclusion

Despite its many definitions, information literacy is at its base a human right that is essential in achieving the personal, social, and economic outcomes of citizens

the world over, including Canada. The relative lack of policy development in Canada and the scattered, incomplete nature of those policies that do exist, have left our country in the undesirable position of lagging behind many others in this area and failing to meet the information literacy-related policy goals outlined by organizations like UNESCO. Librarians in all sectors have an important role to play in advocating for the importance of information literacy and collaborating both within and beyond the profession to ensure that this situation improves. Provincial and national library associations, both traditional and new grassroots movements like Professional Librarians' Guilds, need to start advocating for the importance of information literacy in a systematic way. This advocacy should start with, but not be limited to, their members. It should also connect with groups sharing similar interests and reach out to those interested in human rights and social justice issues. Individual librarians should learn more about information literacy in their sector and their geographic area, and those with more information literacy experience (i.e., academic librarians) should reach out to colleagues who are new to the topic. Building awareness and making connections are the first steps to information policy development in Canada.

Acknowledgements

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