

## Special Forum: An Ethical Imperative of Open Access

# Information Literacy, DEI, OERs, and Library Ethical Imperatives

by Emmett Lombard

Academic libraries are often viewed within contextual frames of reference (e.g., information repository, study space, curricular integration). However, their investment in and responsibility for information literacy bestows ethical imperatives in addition to these contexts. Just as important as engaging with library users to develop their information literacy is impressing upon them why it is important.

The academic library's information literacy responsibility revolves around stakeholders' ability to make informed decisions. In this so-called Information Age, when information itself is arguably the most important societal commodity, an information-challenged person finds themselves at a significant disadvantage. Many frameworks and prescriptions claim to facilitate information literacy, but it is ultimately a process comprising four abilities that can be found either explicitly or implicitly within most frameworks.

One ability involves accurately identifying one's information need. This includes understanding one's topic or goal at a transactional level and understanding why the need exists and its relationship to the information seeker's identity. Sadly, the information literacy process often overlooks this ability to thoughtfully identify an information need concerning oneself.

Another essential ability is to effectively locate information relevant to the identified need. This practical skill set is where such resources as library catalogs, academic databases, and search engines come into play. Developing these skills is often the primary focus of library instruction. A third ability is to evaluate the quality of information one locates. Three criteria that apply regardless of source format include authority (i.e., an author's credentials, experience, and intention), timeliness, and relevance concerning the identified need. A fourth vital ability is appropriately using the information evaluated. Of course, this fourth ability does not necessarily conclude a cycle of engagement with information, as information literacy processes are rarely finite and seldom linear.

Many information literacy frameworks also include an ethical component. However, an argument can be made that ethical implementation of the abilities enumerated above is required at every stage of the process. If a person's intentions are ethical as they identify, locate, evaluate, and use information, then the process is more likely to produce an ethical information literacy outcome. In contrast, any ethical breakdowns during the process will likely result in unethical applications of the information.

In addition to this being an age of information, we operate within a global society rather than locally isolated societies with impenetrable borders created by nationalism or geography. Most modern researchers have access to information far beyond the confines of their community or country. Domestic information is not—and was never—enough by itself. To be information literate in any personal, academic, or professional capacity requires consideration of a diversity of sources, regardless of origin. Thanks to technology, such comprehensiveness becomes more realistic.

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Technology expands the library's information literacy imperative beyond eliminating geographic borders for those seeking information. Thanks to the growing capabilities of and access to technology, more people can publish, as well; a handful of proprietary publishers no longer monopolize the flow of information. Here is where the values of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) become apparent, as the words the acronym represents depend on and demand comprehensiveness and transparency in the production, dissemination, and application of information. Eliminating publishing monopolies combats the ability of the powerful to diminish or censor certain types of information because powerful interests can no longer easily exclude or marginalize alternative perspectives.

This expanded publishing paradigm also expands the academic library information literacy imperative. As more perspectives become available, some will reinforce the values of information literacy and DEI, but others may dismiss or diminish them. Within an environment of increasing diversity, libraries have both the opportunity and the obligation to engage thoughtfully with the new information landscape and educate their communities to do the same. The four information literacy abilities must be stronger than ever to effectively navigate the information explosion that results from new dissemination opportunities because more information producers working through less regulated or unregulated information outlets can result in misinformation.

For DEI to become a more pervasive reality, stakeholders must be information literate about administrative, social, economic, and political systems, structures, and ideas that might thwart it. Take as an example systemic racism in the United States. To truly grasp the construct requires a wide frame of reference, the realization of the harmful results of racism, and an understanding of the forces that allow or promote discrimination. Such reference, realization, and understanding rest on information literacy, which necessitates meaningful consideration of the available authoritative, timely, and relevant information that DEI helps assure.

This development of the information literacy/DEI relationship adds yet another layer to the academic library's ethical imperative. Along with advocating for both DEI and information literacy, the library must cultivate and demonstrate the relationship between them. Although few people seem unaware of DEI, many are unaware of information literacy, let alone any relationship it might have with efforts to support diversity, equity, and inclusion. Libraries must explicitly show that this relationship exists and cultivate the communities' understanding. Fortunately, the means to do so takes form in yet another ethical imperative—open educational resources.

Open educational resources (OERs) can support the information literacy/DEI relationship by expanding access to diverse perspectives and information. OERs are among the influential technological forces preventing a handful of proprietary American and Western European publishers from limiting information diversity or access. Anyone with basic Internet access and usage skills can now seek and provide open educational content. Most OER platforms administered by libraries provide efficient contribution mechanisms and ensure that higher-quality information is disseminated through tried-and-true evaluation and cataloging.

OERs also support inclusion by reducing costs. The high cost of academic textbooks and the financial strains they place on students is well-documented. When libraries help make resources freely available and easily discoverable, more people can access them, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Within the academic environment, expanded access allows a broader range of students to pursue higher education, which initiates and perpetuates a cycle of increased information literacy and DEI advocacy.

The utilization and promotion of OERs by libraries shares many characteristics with the larger open code movement, itself arguably an ethical imperative. Just as some librarians understand the importance of openly available resources for the promotion of information literacy throughout society, so do some computer programmers understand the importance of open-source code for removing barriers in programming. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is because of open coding that many OER initiatives are possible (i.e., some OERs rely on platforms built on open-source code). The values expressed in the open movement provide hope for a more transformational age when actively removing barriers to information and other resources becomes a fundamental focus.

Advancing OERs, DEI, and information literacy is an ethical imperative for academic libraries because libraries and their consortia are the driving forces behind OER creation and information literacy education. They are heavily invested in DEI initiatives by virtue of their institutional and associational missions. Where libraries have influence and experience, they also have an obligation to act. OERs, DEI values, and information-literate dispositions are necessities for the majority, not simply transactional ancillaries for elite minorities who may publicly profess diversity, equity, and inclusion while neither embracing nor facilitating these central values.

OERs, DEI, and information literacy form a new triadic ethical imperative. The triad rests on the fact that the three components share a symbiotic relationship: equitably promoting information literacy now requires the diverse, inclusive resources that OER initiatives make available; increasing DEI now requires the information literacy abilities that OER imperatives can facilitate; and increasing the quality and value of OERs requires attention to information literate perspectives and DEI priorities. Libraries already inhabit the contextual frameworks necessary to implement this triad; now, they must go further and in new directions with their advocacy. Such advocacy is an ethical imperative.