

**We Are Not Consumers:  
Using Discourse Analysis and Zines to Challenge the Cognitive  
Viewpoint in Library Science**

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## Introduction

Computers are changing everything; the internet is changing everything; cellphones are changing everything; tablets are changing everything. The internet has come among us, and nothing will ever be the same. The horn blowing about rapid and radical change spurred by technology is a constant din, and inescapable for those working in fields related to 'information'. People in developed countries are living in an age of digital information, and everything in our society, including libraries, must change to accommodate this new reality. The world is going to be dramatically different now, freer, more democratic, more connected. Or so we are told.

There is a din of bloviating about 'the information age', but not a lot of clarity about what the rise of personal computing and internet connectivity means for institutions like libraries. A cornerstone of civic life in the United States, libraries are a place to access information about our society in the hope that a well-informed population is a boon to a well-functioning democracy. There is an assumption that more information means more democracy, but the internet is not a guaranteed force for democracy. At best, and even this ability is proscribed by corporate and governmental powers, the internet can act as a flood of possible information from thousands upon thousands of sources. As detailed in Eli Pariser's book *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You*, it is easy for powerful internet companies to personalize content to a user – for commercial purposes – and keeping one from seeing other results (2011). Many of the largest sites on the internet are new appendages of old power structures, like MSN, or new power structures that dominate all around them, like Google (*1,000 most-visited*, 2011). Internet connections are a must for any contemporary library, but to answer how libraries might change in the digital era we must look to how we think about information.

One of the dominant information theories in library science, the cognitive viewpoint, threatens to lead us into missing a great opportunity to make libraries a strong force for democracy in our society. Pushed by Brookes, Belkin, and many others, the cognitive viewpoint treats information as just another commodity, and libraries as just another supplier of a consumer good. This view describes librarians as information service professionals, limiting librarianship to the finding of an information product to fit an information need. This is a damaging notion to libraries, and to the possibility of libraries as democratic institutions in a time of great information profusion. Libraries should reject the cognitive viewpoint that treats information as a commodity and patrons as consumers, and adopt a community-empowering approach as seen in transformative pedagogy and the zine subculture. In this paper I will use Foucaultian discourse analysis to criticize the cognitive viewpoint, and offer an alternative theory of transformative libraries formed around a literary community of makers and sharers that embody resistance to the commodification of thought and the possibility of creating communities of knowledge.

### **The Cognitive Viewpoint: Quantifying Information**

Library and Information Science as a discipline and a practice, is concerned with information and knowledge, and defining them philosophically can greatly effect the practices of a library. Prominent voices in the LIS community advocate the cognitive viewpoint for explaining how people interact with information. This view is supposedly user-centered, because it focuses on how a person absorbs information from a place like a library. Sounds simple and unassuming, but as Belkin's laudatory survey of the cognitive viewpoint reveals there is a particular theory of cognition at work in

the cognitive viewpoint which, “explicitly considers that the states of knowledge and beliefs and so on of human beings [or information-processing devices] mediate [or interact with] that which they receive/perceive or produce,” (12). This is a classical view of information, with the individual processing the world around them to create a state of knowledge within them (Floridi, 40). This makes information a minor object in the search for a greater truth, while also placing all of the emphasis on the individual. Knowledge is something that happens within a person, and information is something that is passed from an information source, like a text or another person, to the person. This suggests a process that can be simplified down to a small number of actors, and is supposed to simplify and help libraries serve patrons better by placing users at the center.

Proponents of the cognitive viewpoint go even farther this, and argue that information processing is something quantifiable. Belkin traces the basis of the cognitive viewpoint to the work of B.C. Brookes and the idea of transmitting information or knowledge in a definite way:

$$K[S] + \Delta I = K[S + \Delta S]$$

Where  $K[S]$  is the previous knowledge system,  $\Delta I$  is the information, and  $K[S + \Delta S]$  is the new system (Belkin, 12).

“This equation implies that information is that which modifies what is denoted by  $K[S]$ , which is a knowledge structure; that knowledge and information have the same dimensions, and that information is, as is the knowledge discussed, structured,” (Belkin, 12). With this equation there is a way to measure when a user has absorbed information and now has new knowledge. The underlying idea is that there is something quantitative and objective happening when a person interacts with a text.

Quantifying information in this way suggests that it shares attributes of physical objects, like crates of produce, that are produced, transported, and consumed. This is an objectivist view of

information as a semiotic family, as described by Furner, where information is a thing, and our texts contain it (174). As Furner writes, “information resources (texts, sentences, words, characters, bits) “contain” information, that information resources “have” meanings, that “the” meaning of an information resource is discoverable by all,” (174). Information is waiting inside texts for discovery by a person, and the librarian only needs to connect a user with it.

Belkin—and those he is surveying—does give ground to admit that there is some amount of anomalous elements in how people process information. Despite those admissions, Belkin touts the usefulness of the cognitive viewpoint in describing how patrons interact with libraries into an objective and quantifiable process. “I would like to stress that the example studies reviewed here gave important results in studies of literature and objective knowledge... we have strong evidence that taking the cognitive viewpoint of information science can lead to highly beneficial results,” (14). Those beneficial results are the goal of the cognitive viewpoint and are detailed statistically in the papers Belkin cites. Proponents of the cognitive view point seem to say: If the patron is at the center of our information science, then we are automatically giving the most energy we can to their needs. Indeed, a simpler information science with the user at the center makes it easier to say that you are serving a groups' information needs. A cognitive viewpoint library can produce a document, like the production report of a factory, that shows exactly how much information they are diapering to patrons, and clap itself on the back for following such rigorous methods and efficient results. Unless, of course, they are overlooking something.

**Information as a Commodity and Discourse Analysis: Individual Cognition or Domination?**

As Budd points out, the cognitive viewpoint can lead to a commodification of information that is explicitly tied to market economics. It makes providing information access, “referential to the exchange property of information (service) and introduces a connection with the concept of markets for the exchange. This connection has an inherent focus on a physical attribute of information that allows for exchange and for the creation and maintenance of vehicles for exchange” (Budd, 224). This begins to touch on the serious issues with building information science and librarianship around this idea. It both creates a service-based model of librarianship that is linked with market economics, and ignores the deeper problems in communication of information brought up by philosophers like Foucault and Derrida. Using the tool of discourse analysis Michel Foucault describes in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), the problems of the cognitive viewpoint can be revealed and the beginnings of an alternative theory of information sharing suggested.

The cognitive viewpoint is troubling for a few reasons. This is a model of the transmission of knowledge that is very linear and quantifiable, and easily turned into a commodity, but could lead to ignoring the contextual place of any text, and the forces that have created the supposed 'information exchange' to begin with. The cognitive view is a gross simplification of how people interact with the world around them, and threatens to reduce people, with all of their strange impulses and particular experiences into mere information-consuming automatons.

It's possible to see the cognitive viewpoint as a combination of the philosophical idea that there is a certain truth waiting for discovery—seen in Plato and Kant—and a market economics approach to providing access to information. Any informative process can look like an exchange in this view, and all the librarian needs to do is find the correct, true nugget of knowledge for the patron-consumer. In contrast, Foucault's theory looks at the way knowledge is formed and acts around different sectors of authority, like medicine, history, and information science. By looking at how the discourse talks about subjects and objects (not through a direct analysis of the subjects and objects themselves) one can find

out what forces are forming the discourses. This can yield an understanding of elements that might not seem obvious at first. The cognitive viewpoint is meant to center information-gathering around the user, to make the experience about them, but discourse analysis reveals darker effects.

Although Foucault's theories can be hard to decipher – he even talks of a desire to change his mind freely and without questions, “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it our bureaucrats and police to see that our papers are in order,” – there is a concrete method at their core (17). Foucault approached areas of knowledge and study, like medicine in this example, not as discovered universal truths but as, “a corpus of knowledge that presupposed the same way of looking at things, the same division of the perceptual field,” and, “a series of descriptive statements,” (33). Foucault approached knowledge and information as objects shaped by their context, not by some absolute truth. In discourse analysis the central question is: “what was being said in what was said?” (28). As Budd writes, Discourse analysis is particularly useful in any study of LIS, because it is a multidisciplinary field that is based around information, and how we talk about information varies from field to field. “One thing remains constant throughout discussions about information, and that is the reality that the notions and definitions of information are imbedded in the discourse of the many disciplines that lay some claim to the study of information, its growth, its transfer, and its storage. The meaning of the word information, then, is relative in that it does not denote a single, unitary, agreed-upon substance or idea,” (217). Just as important, is LIS's focus on communication. Patrons come to libraries to access information, to communicate with texts, or to directly communicate with others over the internet. “The profession of library and information science is one that is based on and sensitive to communication. ... Further, communication entails the employment of language for social purposes; the producer of a message has a receiver in mind. This communication process is central to discourse analysis” (Budd, 218). Since LIS is so concerned with both information, a relativistic concept which can mean so many things to different people and groups, and communication it an appropriate object of

study for discourse analysis, which seeks to identify the different forces at work in any grouping of knowledge.

Frohmann offers a trenchant analysis of the cognitive viewpoint within LIS using Foucault's theory. He identifies seven discourses within the cognitive viewpoint that seek to make information commodified and turn people into information consumers: “(a) universality of theory, (b) referentiality and reification of 'images', (c) internalization of representations, (d) radical individualism and erasure of the social -dimension of theory, (e) insistence upon knowledge, (f) constitution of the information scientist as an expert in image negotiation, and (g) instrumental reason, ruled by efficiency, standardisation, predictability, and determination of effects,” (365). As seen through these discourses, the cognitive viewpoint is in many ways deeply unsettling.

In a similar way to the Fukuyama's infamous “end of history” argument about the supremacy of capitalism in the wake of the end of the cold war, “the cognitive viewpoint presents itself neither as one theory among many, nor as a local theory of specific problems, but as a *total* theory for LIS, and as its *only* theory,” (Frohmann, 371). This is a very limiting aspect to have for any theory, especially one that seeks to help define a field like LIS, which focuses on information—an idea with immense breadth and where context means so much.

With this march towards universal acceptance, the cognitive viewpoint brings along another universal theory: the supremacy of truth in the individual's mind. As seen in the equation in the previous section, the cognitive viewpoint is concerned with information entering an individual's mind and knowledge state, not how that information is related to the larger world. Such an individually focused theory of information appears beneficial, since it is “user-centered” as proponents describe it. While this view is affirming of an individual's abilities and agency, it threatens to bury any conception of external, and social, knowledge. With this view, “The inner is the real, the true, and the essential, because therein lies the beating heart of individual identity. External, system categories are

epiphenomenal, defective,” (Frohmann, 375). This narrow view can easily lead to a theory of information that is easy to manipulate, “where 'information stores' and 'information needs' are constructed and contested on behalf of specific interests, and where image production and manipulation are highly politicised social practices” (Frohmann, 376). Individuals, once they are told what is and isn't true, will not question what they believe to be their own, found inner truths instead of social constructs of what might be true.

As Frohmann discusses, this theory identifies only two poles in an information-centered action, those generating the information and those consuming it (378-382). Conveniently, the information scientist or librarian is left out of this equation. This leaves power in the hands of both the information generator and the hidden intermediary, while leaving the user as a person whose only possible action is to accept information. “The cognitive viewpoint constructs an 'expert subject' as the identity of the information scientist by distributing knowledge and ignorance unequally among the three major actors in its drama of information seeking. The user, by contrast, plays the role of a mere supplicant to a system whose generation, construction and interrogation is left to others” (Frohmann, 379). In this position of supplication, the user is then expected to consume information, and not ask too many questions.

Beyond the curtailing of the individual's interaction in processing information, this view risks moving us closer to an industrial model of information. As Budd discusses, economists like Peter F. Drucker, particularly in his book *Post-Capitalist Society*, see information as a new kind of resource that must be produced for an economy to grow (222-223). Treating information like this makes it something that is bought and sold, not something that can enrich a person's intellectual life.

With its desire for dominant status, lack of larger social focus, placing the individual as only an information consumer, and industrial approach, the cognitive viewpoint threatens the future of libraries as democratic institutions. “The 'user-centric' promise of the cognitive viewpoint is compromised by

the ways in which its discursive resources are mobilized to integrate users firmly within a market system of information consumption as much outside their control as any other highly monopolized system of consumer product production and exchange, (Frohmann, 384).” A library can be so much more than an information market where patrons consume what they are told to by information professionals, there is another way.

### **Transformative Libraries: Communities of Knowledge**

If an individual will find only the freedom to consume in the cognitive viewpoint, what other opportunities are there? Using the work of theorists like Paulo Friere, others have presented a way of looking at libraries through an alternative pedagogy that promotes creating communities of knowledge and social action. “Librarians should become more open to serving multiple audiences. This goal can be achieved by discarding the positivist view of libraries as neutral sites and rethinking them as sites of situated social action,” (Riedler & Eryman, 91). Creating libraries as places of community interaction can both create a space for talking about social issues, but also switches the purpose of an information institution from the consumption of existing information seen in the cognitive viewpoint to the creation of new information by community members. “Critical library pedagogy recognizes that learner and community experiences are central to the education process, meaning that the role of the transformative library and its staff is to facilitate the production of knowledge rather than its transmission,” (Riedler & Eryman, 91).

One way to foster this critical library pedagogy is through collection development. Radnor looked at alternative libraries, including one that collected books removed from library collections (or 'deaccessed'), and what could be seen in those collections. Once again using discourse analysis, Radnor

investigates how collection development is important not only to what people can access but how the library is philosophically structured. “In Foucault’s analysis, the appearance and arrangements of discourse are central. Some texts are able to appear, others are not. Some texts are taken into the library, others become deaccessioned. Some texts fit, others do not,” (Radnor, 257). What texts are available at any library constrain what a library can achieve. To move away from the cognitive viewpoint, and its community of passive consumption, libraries will need to take a look at their collections to make them more friendly to creating a community of knowledge. A transformative library engages patrons and allows them to produce their own information, but how do you create that? A possible way to do this is through collections of that most textual example of do-it-yourself culture: the zine.

### **Zines: Creation and Negation**

The word above is not a typo, zines are a common method of expression in communities that lack, or disdain, traditional commercial or academic publishing connections. Similar to their big sibling magazines, zines are small texts usually containing material around similar themes, but they differ in being self-produced and often reflecting the experiences of people far outside mainstream culture. Stoddart and Kiser give an overview of zines and their place in libraries, and humorously say, “Zines are eccentric little publications that are expansive in their format and content,” (192). Generally, zines lack a traditional publisher and many are made using borrowed photocopiers and personal computers. They can look strange and sometimes contain spelling and grammatical errors. This can make them seem unprofessional enough to be dismissed from any serious collection. Stoddart presents three reasons for keeping zines in libraries: they provide alternative points of view, they embody personal expression, and they are a written record of our culture (192-3). To this I would add a fourth, zines exist

as an expression that personal creation of information is possible.

## Creation

Zines, of course, have a great deal of meaning beyond their inclusion in a library collection, but the mere fact of their inclusion can change the discursive formation of a particular library and libraries in general. Zines are unwanted by most traditional libraries and often deal with subjects that are considered subversive or would make many people uncomfortable. Topics like radical feminism, anarchism and anti-capitalistic politics, transsexuality, queer theory, and radical environmentalism are often discussed along with personal accounts of life on the margins of society. Most zines often detail, and are the product of, subversive cultures their inclusion means that the discourse of the library has become more subversive in itself.

To understand how zines are currently used in libraries, I visited several in the New York City area, including the New York Public Library's collection at the Schwarzman Building and the Barnard Feminist Zine Library at the Barnard Library of Barnard College in New York. At Barnard, the first zine I picked up *You Are My Heart: An Arab Trans Zine* by lamy had in the introduction a perfect example of the twin impulse involved in the creation of zines: "The reason for this zine is partially to maintain my sanity, and also to make others think about shit they take for granted." The author is speaking of the experiences of living in the United States as a trans person of color and dealing with a daily retinue of harassment because of their outsider status. Many zines are essentially diaries in nature and embody a personal, artistic creation from the creator's life. Zines can function to register a political feeling, remember a notable life event, or provide documentation of a group, lifestyle, or situation that is often ignored in media. *You Are My Heart* both records the experiences of a Lebanese trans person in

America—including racial profiling and the struggle of someone who does not identify with the traditional gender dichotomy—while also presenting a challenge to people who, because of their privileged status in society, have no idea that such oppression is happening.

Beyond the individual content and the challenge to traditional texts, zines have a further force they exert upon readers through their mere existence: the lowering of barriers to creation. Many zines contain exhortations for the reader to make their own zines, and the handmade quality and low production value of the texts implant the idea that the reader could do this themselves. *You Are My Heart* contains a profusion of styles and media: essays, poems, pictures, maps, and paintings populate the pages and the entire text is obviously handmade on a photocopier. Reading a zine often leaves one with the feeling that they could make one themselves, which is the exact opposite of the feeling intended by most academic or literary texts that strive to appear as singular creations of genius and zealous study.

Zines can be a tool to engage patrons in a community of knowledge, by showing them that their experiences are worth recording, and that it is possible to create those records. There are plenty of ways to create information using digital tools like wordpress, facebook, and twitter, but a zine is a text of purely personal and individual expression, unmediated by the companies that operate those digital tools. Producing a zine makes the creator intimately involved in every aspect of creating a text, and functions as both an expression of personal creativity and a window to see other texts as part of social discourses as opposed to authoritative truths. The zine is both a way to engage in discourse analysis and critical pedagogy, and they are easy to catalog and index in a traditional library.

## **Negation**

In every example of a zine collection subsumed into a library that I studied for this paper the zines were kept separate from the other texts, perhaps to make it easier to find them, but in a way that further strengthens their subversive nature and their opposition to traditional texts. This is both a recognition of their outsider status, but also a way of protecting the dominant discourse in the library. Shelf browsing is a widely regarded positive aspect of physical libraries and collections of texts, and by failing to integrate the zines into the main collection patrons would be unlikely to accidentally stumble on them. At the Barnard Feminist Zine Library, the zines are cataloged electronically in the same manner as other texts, though, so that may alleviate some of the effects of exclusion.

That exclusion makes sense in way, because zines are often fundamentally documents of rejection aimed at society. Joanna Issacson argues that zines within radical feminist and anarchist communities like riot grrl are not just concerned with the pleasurable act of creation, but rather a politics of expressive negation against the politics of society that can lead to creation of alternative structures. “This is seen as an intensely pleasurable and empowering process for the women who create DIY zines, music, and art. And yet, much of the imagery at work in these forms of cultural production is intentionally ugly, angry, and critical of mundane pleasures and practices. I see this as evidence of a politics of expressive negation” (Issacson, 1).

This rejection is not entirely philosophically negative, it contains the seeds of a way to create alternative, transformative spaces. Issacson sees the zine works coming out riot grrrl as part of a utopian tradition of thought that wants to not merely critique society through subversive art, but present a new way of living, “rather than appealing to authority, this form of communication’s power generates from its own internal logic” (2). By refusing the society they find intolerable and subverting it through music, art and zines, Issacson sees riot grrrl as creating a different society. She also cites many instances of *détournement* in riot grrrl music and zines (8). *Détournement* is a form of subversive political art that uses the symbols of powerful agents in society to critique them. By creating a

subversive alternative space Issacson sees riot grrl as having the opportunity to truly create social change (although it failed for reasons she also details).

This culture of negation is one that might seem foreign to the idea of a public library. Libraries are seen as places of affirmative learning, where one can better oneself through education and achieve the liberal dream of moving up the social ladder through self-improvement. If we are seeking to move away from the problems of the cognitive viewpoint, however, this view is helpful to libraries. Instead of libraries as places to impart the 'right' information, they can be places that foster critique and allow people to talk about how they feel in their society.

Issacson further talks about how the zine *Doris*, written by Cindy Crabb, chronicled an attempt to create an anarchofeminist space in Asheville, North Carolina. Crabb, and many others, drew inspiration from the critical negation of the riot grrl movement, and other radical groups, to imagine, and tried to create, a true alternative culture to the patriarchal consumer capitalist one around her.

Zines can be used to help create these alternative spaces. Issacson discusses the work of Janice Radway, who studies zines, “she [Radway] argues that zines are central to the building of communities, serving as texts “but also acts to be engaged and passed on” (142). For Radway, zines serve as a form of communication rather than simply activism and build to new discursive formations,” (16). As elements within new discourses that are created in libraries, zines can help provide a way for people to change their lives and situations, and create communities of knowledge and social action.

### **A Non-consumer Library**

Moving away from the cognitive viewpoint will take a lot of work on the part of librarians and other library workers. The information-service perspective is ingrained in the way lots of libraries operate and try to help their patrons. There is also a value in helping people find the books, articles,

films, and other media they are trying to locate. If we seek to make libraries collaborative environments where the discourses in our society are discussed and critiqued, zines are a simple way to motivate communication. A library could host zines from patrons themselves to start a conversation about important issues that feels more personal than one around theorists or accounts from communities far away. Patrons could speak about why they created zines, and others could respond with their own works. With workshops and discussion groups, libraries could foster the kind of local democratic experience that is lacking from many communities even in an age where communication infrastructure allows for instantaneous contact. Any library should make these kinds of decisions based on their own community's needs, but it is important to start from the perspective of recognizing patrons as thoughtful, political, and motivated agents, not passive consumers of information.

Zines are immediate, personal creations that are not easily classified, not easily turned into an information product. In this way zines can help challenge the notion in information science that libraries, and librarians, exist to exchange informational products that one must have for whatever economic reason that is required by market forces. As discourse analysis shows, the cognitive viewpoint is a positive force only for those in powerful positions that seek to use information discourses to control others socially and politically.

Libraries could be more than that, libraries can break out of that discourse into another space, one that fosters creation, personal expression, and, yes, the exchange of information between people. Libraries can become places of refusal to commodification in our everyday lives, and the commodification of information in our society. Zines can help libraries do this, and become something different than information-service centers by refusing the cognitive viewpoint. "I see expressive negation as pointing to a gradual form of transformation of everyday life. To this end, I have attempted to look at DIY negation as a tactic that has enduring effects on the everyday life of both the participants and the culture at large," (Issacson, 16).

Saying no is a powerfully affirmative action, and libraries should say no to treating people as consumers and yes to treating them as individuals who can interact with the information in a collection and create their information to share with others.

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