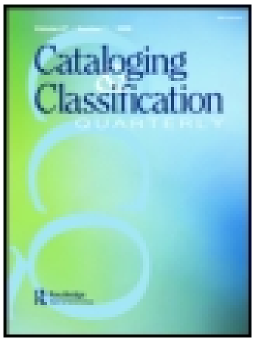

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Factotem: What is Information Access for?

Melanie Feinberg

School of Information and Library Science (SILS), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

ABSTRACT
Inspired by Allyson Carlyle's advice to explain fundamental concepts clearly and simply, this article seeks to explain the notion of information access, and what it means to provide information access in a responsible way. Specifically, this essay looks at the idea of facts. How should providers of information deal with facts? To examine this question, the essay considers the 2017 protest slogan "Librarians for Facts." What does this slogan really mean? Ultimately, the essay contends that information providers need to determine what they are *for,* and orient information access mechanisms toward that goal.

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Homage: Allyson Carlyle's advising wisdom

As an advisor, Allyson Carlyle empowered her doctoral students to pursue the questions that engaged us in the manner that we deemed most appropriate. For our dissertations, she did not require us to adhere to any particular disciplinary orientation, methodological approach, or set of genre conventions. But she did have one demand: if Allyson was not familiar with the disciplines, approaches, or genre conventions that we wanted to employ, we had to explain them. For my own dissertation, I adopted an approach that combined both the humanities and design, neither of which was familiar to Allyson. Accordingly, I had to explain, in my dissertation itself, what constitutes research in the humanities and research in design, and how those forms of research differ from social science.

It was frustrating, at first, to undertake this task: to articulate basic notions that no one within those disciplinary orientations would need to examine. A literary scholar would not need to define what "reading" meant, and would not need to explain how this "reading" differs from the content analysis that a social scientist might use to understand a text. But as I gave myself over to this chore that Allyson had requested, I realized that my frustration had arisen not because this was a meaningless and obvious task,

CONTACT Melanie Feinberg mfeinber@unc.edu School of Information and Library Science (SILS), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 100 Manning Hall, CB#3360, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3360.
Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/wccq.

but because it was a difficult, squirrelly one. Although I knew how to read the figurative language in a poem like a literary scholar and how to perform a content audit of discussion forum postings like a social scientist, I was not initially able to *explain* those activities in a clear and simple way. Allyson's requirement forced me to attend to fundamental assumptions in a way that I had not previously been asked to do. What I might have originally disdained as unnecessary was probably the most valuable part of my dissertation. To explain the goals and methods of the humanities to Allyson, I had to cultivate a form of attention that made me look much more carefully at what I was doing and why I was doing it.

In this article, I honor Allyson by attempting to explain a set of ideas and practices that I recently realized I did not fully understand. This time, I seek to unpack assumptions behind the notion of information access, and what it means to provide information access in a responsible way. Specifically, I look at the idea of facts. How should providers of information deal with facts?

To explore this question, I use the form of a personal narrative, rather than a scholarly treatise. A personal narrative allows me to trace the story of my engagement with this question in a direct, concrete way. It also allows me to frame my discussion around teaching, an aspect of scholarship that we tend not to acknowledge when reporting on "research" activities. In teaching, however, we are often compelled to articulate the explanations that "scholarly research" may allow us to omit. The form of personal narrative also allows me to be forthright about my own beliefs and values, and to be reflective about how those beliefs and values contribute to my understanding. While all stories involve some artifice, a personal narrative facilitates the pursuit of transparency, if not its attainment. (Although my scope is more limited, my approach shares some characteristics with authoethnography.[1])

Prologue: Librarians for Facts

On January 21, 2017, I attended the Women's March in Raleigh, North Carolina, one of many marches held on that day across the United States. The Women's March was organized to demonstrate support for values of equality, tolerance, and justice. Held on the day after the inauguration of President Trump, the march was widely seen as an act of resistance against the new administration, repudiating the sexist, racist, and anti-immigrant sentiments associated with the Trump campaign.

At the march, among a wide array of clever placards voicing dissent—my favorite was probably "I'm only an angry feminist when you're a misogynistic asshole"—a group of three women wore small signs around their necks identifying themselves as Librarians for Facts. I saw them, briefly, and then later discovered that my colleague Zeynep Tufekci had taken a picture and posted it to Twitter (see Figure 1).

At the march, it seemed clear what Librarians for Facts meant. In the weeks before the inauguration, the news media had begun reporting on the influence that widely promulgated false stories ("fake news") might have had on the election, such as the allegation that Hillary Clinton had managed a child sex ring from a Washington, DC pizzeria.[2,3] Furthermore, the previous day, following the poorly attended inauguration, both the president and his press secretary, Sean Spicer, had made erroneous claims about the size of the crowd, claiming that it was "the largest audience ever" without proof to support that contention. Contrary evidence cited by the press, from comparative photographs to Metro usage and expert crowd estimates, was plentiful, and Spicer's remarks were widely covered.[4–6] The day after the march, White House senior staffer Kellyanne Conway would tell Chuck Todd on *Meet the Press* that Spicer had merely employed "alternative facts" to those produced by the press corps to dispute Spicer's contentions.[7]

With their protest signs, it seemed that the librarians at the march were affirming their profession's continued adherence to "facts" in a traditional sense: information that is accepted as true, for which proofs can be established according to generally agreed standards of evidence. At the march,

Figure 1. Librarians for Facts. (Photo by Zeynep Tufekci.)

I cheered the idea of Librarians for Facts. In my thinking, when juxtaposed against an Administration of Blatant Lies, who would not cheer Librarians for Facts? Right on!

Later that week, however, I find myself returning to the notion of Librarians for Facts and getting increasingly uneasy. I was preparing introductory lectures for an undergraduate course in Foundations of Information Science (INLS 201), and I was pondering how best to introduce students to fundamental concepts of the information professions, such as "information access." What kind of information access was a slogan like Librarians for Facts really advocating? I began to ruminate on this notion, trying to explain it to myself, so that I could explain it to my students.

Teaching INLS 201: Information, truth, and institutional circuitry

The spring semester of 2017 was my first time teaching INLS 201, and so I had to write all my lectures and other materials from scratch. For one of my first lectures, I attempted to both introduce and problematize the notion of "information" as presented by the philosopher Luciano Floridi.[8] Floridi reserves the word "information" for semantic, factual data, or data that can be proven true. Accordingly, statements for which truth claims are not relevant, such as instructional statements (for example, "to turn on your computer, press the Power button"), or poetry, or artistic photographs, are meaningful but not "information" as such. For Floridi, information is facts, and only information (and not other, non-factual content) can lead to knowledge. If we accept Floridi's understanding of information, then Librarians for Facts would be "for" statements that can be established as true, which seems like what the librarians may have intended, given the context of their protest.

Students often agree with Floridi instinctively, because he sounds authoritative: he writes as if he is stating facts, not making an argument. As the instructor, I point out his account's limitations. One objection is relatively straightforward: the activities of information professionals are clearly not limited to statements that can be proven to be true. Floridi's definition of information is insufficient as a practical matter, in terms of understanding what information systems and services should be able to accomplish. And then there is the capacity of "untrue" content to nonetheless inform: while a novel may technically be a bunch of lies, is it not informative of the human experience? Patrick Wilson discusses how fiction may be informative in this way.[9] Still, perhaps factual statements should be distinguished from other kinds of meaningful content; perhaps they should have a special status. Maybe this is what the Librarians for Facts really meant: that librarians should clarify which statements are true, and which are not.

Other objections to Floridi's argument are similarly linked to our practical engagements with information and truth. In the real world, truth is messy and observer-dependent, rather than the clearly delineated, universally determined logical construct employed in philosophical argumentation. As an example of a true proposition, Floridi uses "Paris is the capital of France." In contrast, "Paris is the capital of Canada" would be false. "Paris is the capital of France" is a fact; "Paris is the capital of Canada" is not a fact. Perhaps we can imagine Librarians for Facts making similar distinctions. Similarly, "Vancouver is in Canada," seems true, while "Vancouver is in France" seems false. "Vancouver is in France" is not a fact; "Vancouver is in Canada" is a fact.

There are perspectives, however, under which "Vancouver is in Canada" is contested. For some people, the real fact is this: "Vancouver is located on unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations." In 2014, the Vancouver city council formally accepted this perspective.[10] Public events in British Columbia often begin with this acknowledgement. Most of the world recognizes Vancouver as being in Canada, but some, including the Vancouver municipal government, question the legitimacy of this claim. Are both these propositions "facts," and both "true," even though they contradict each other?

Such complex situations are not limited to political issues. "Everest is the tallest mountain on the planet" equally seems like a fact. But the truth of this proposition depends on the scale of measurement used to establish height. Everest is the tallest mountain based on elevation from sea level. However, measuring from the center of the Earth produces a different answer: Mount Chimborazo, in Ecuador.[11] This is because the Earth bulges around the equator, so Chimborazo is the farthest point from the center of the Earth, but not the farthest point from sea level. Does this mean that "Everest is the tallest mountain" is not a fact? No. Different measurement scales are useful for different purposes, and measurement from sea level is an appropriate scale for many human interests in mountains (such as climbing them; climbing Everest is notoriously difficult and dangerous, while climbing Chimborazo is not). Measurement from the center of the Earth is useful for certain calculations—other human interests. To debate which measurement is "more true" is meaningless. They are useful for different purposes.

Surely, however, it is easier to decide whether values for a particular, defined characteristic are accurate? We would never agree that Everest is merely 2000 ft over sea level, or that Vancouver is in France. Perhaps Librarians for Facts is really clarifying accuracy, rather than truth. Accuracy should be easier to agree on, and be less situationally determined. Here's another example that I find illustrative in this regard.[12] Users of

Table 1. Body Type values from three online dating sites. (Collected June 28, 2017.)

OK Cupid	Dharma Match	SoulGeek
Rather not say	Slender	Athletic
Thin	Athletic	A few extra pounds
Overweight	Average	Curvaceous
Average build	A few extra pounds	Big guy
Fit	Large	Big gal
Jacked	Curvy	About average
A little extra	Leave Blank	Petite Thin
Full figured		
Curvy		
Used up		

online dating services are asked to describe various personal characteristics for their profiles. Often, dating services employ controlled vocabularies for these characteristics, to enable systematic searching and sorting of potential dates. One characteristic that often uses a vocabulary is Body Type. Although the vocabularies across services are similar, they employ different values. Table 1 shows a few examples.

When students think about how they would select a value in these different vocabularies, they realize that "body type" in this context is only partly about what you look like; it is also about the self-image that you want to project to others (are you the kind of person who describes herself as Curvy, A Few Extra Pounds, or Big Gal?). Accuracy, in this context, is quite nuanced. If you want potential dates to know that you feel yourself to be Curvy, that's what you pick. Accordingly, other forms of data collection do not seem to make a lot of sense: having a panel of independent raters (crowdsourcing!) select your Body Type value based on your picture, or having other users select your value after you've dated them. Furthermore, more objective forms of measurement clearly do not convey the same information. Entering one's height, weight, and the circumference of various body parts is really a different characteristic entirely from the idea of Body Type expressed by these vocabularies. Accuracy is equally fraught in this scenario. Students often remark that quantitative measurements in the dating context are likely going to be lies, or at the very least optimistic (this was my weight that time last winter when I was sick with the flu and did not eat for three days, etc.). And yet, when I posit the increasingly achievable possibility of automatic, continually updated quantitative measurements based on sensor data (in your bathroom scale, in the waistband of your pants, all connected by the Internet of Things), everyone thinks this is absolutely terrible. No one wants that kind of accuracy to be displayed about themselves, or even to know it about other people.

What this example demonstrates is that accuracy is not universal, either. The data collection protocols and forms of evidence that seem valid and reliable in one context are not necessarily so in another. For online dating, scientific standards of "objective" measurement are neither appropriate nor "accurate." To impose those standards upon the online dating context would be weird and terrible. Indeed, the decision to use "objective" measurement is of necessity a subjective one; that is, it is situationally dependent and not universally valid.

When I start thinking about examples like this, I begin to realize that, if Librarians for Facts is meant to establish a clear basis for responsible information access, then it does not seem to be on firm ground. Arguing about which situationally dependent perspective is "more true" is not going to produce clear result. (This explains how accusations of "fake news" can be leveled by anyone about anything.)

As a counterpoint to Floridi's discussion of information, the readings for the first week of INLS 201 also included a 1995 article by Phil Agre that envisioned the future of librarianship in a world of digital libraries.[13] Agre's understanding of information leads to a different way of comprehending the possibilities of Librarians for Facts. Agre observed that, within the profession of librarianship, information had been described as a context-independent, universally valid substance (rather like Floridi's understanding of information as facts). Agre, however, characterizes this way of defining information as a strategic bit of professional ideology. By orienting their profession around "information," librarians could claim to serve all users equally, maintaining an air of professional impartiality and objectivity. (Agre's understanding aligns with the American Library Association's emphasis on intellectual freedom in their professional code of ethics, a position examined by Jens-Erik Mai[14]). Agre argues that, like facts, information comes to be understood within a community of practice, which Agre associates with the documents ("literatures") produced by those communities. As articulated by genre theorists such as Yates and Orlikowski, the strutural, formal, stylistic, and other conventions of literatures (which Agre calls their "institutional circuitry") provide the conditions under which information comes to be, within a literature.[15] (We might also describe this as the conditions under which facts are made and accepted as such.) Agre imagines a future where librarians provide access to literatures, rather than information. In Agre's vision, librarians create distinct access mechanisms for particular configurations of institutional circuitry.

Agre's conception of what this would actually look like is a little vague: it is not clear if librarians would create access mechanisms that *align* with the institutional circuitry of particular literatures (for example, using "the unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples" as the location of Vancouver for some literatures, while using "Canada" as the location of Vancouver for others), that would *elucidate* and *compare* institutional circuitry (documenting the evidentiary basis upon which Vancouver is determined to be within unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples for some literatures), or that would *examine* and *critique* institutional circuitry (assessing the evidentiary basis upon which the location of Vancouver is determined). The second option (creating access mechanisms that elucidate and compare the institutional circuitry of literatures) is similar to Birger Hjørland's description of domain analysis, which proposes that knowledge organization systems should document the epistemological perspectives associated with the various schools of thought in a subject domain.[16–18] The third option (creating access mechanisms that assess and critique the institutional circuitry of literatures) has similarities to Patrick Wilson's notion of the skeptical librarian, which posits that, because there is no clear method for librarians to select between cognitive authorities, librarians might instead describe the weaknesses of all of them.[19]

All three possibilities suggested by Agre's discussion provide alternate understandings of Librarians for Facts. Instead of making universal pronouncements about truth value, Librarians for Facts might:

- determine appropriate "facts" for particular contexts
- describe the evidentiary conditions under which facts might be established in particular contexts
- identify weaknesses in the evidentiary mechanisms accepted by particular contexts.

If Agre's understanding of information as literatures embedded within institutional circuitry provides a more robust basis for positioning "facts" in the the context of information access, it is, however, less helpful at understanding the positioning of "librarians" (or other information professionals) in relation to facts and their provisioning. While Agre observes that the presentation of librarianship as neutral and objective is a strategic choice to legitimize a certain form of information access, he does not propose that librarians should articulate their own positions regarding the materials that they make available. Indeed, Agre (along with Hjørland and Wilson) implies that librarians might continue to remain outside the literatures they collect, describe, and provide access to—that librarians should explain these literatures but not participate in them.

But this approach seems ill-equipped to explain one vital aspect of Librarians for Facts: its appearance at a protest march. If it is untenable to endorse "facts" as a universally valid phenomenon, then is it sufficient to merely criticize the evidentiary basis of any potential fact? Attempts to maintain this kind of neutrality inevitably seem to fail (as, once again, demonstrated by the potential for anyone to call anything "fake news"). If "facts" are not objective, then being "for" facts is also not objective.

Here's another teaching scenario that may clarify matters. One rationale of the ALA stance toward intellectual freedom is that serving users well requires that librarians not judge users' information needs. While this seems compelling in the abstract, it becomes complicated to maintain in actual practice situations. I have presented students with the following dilemma: according to a user survey, your library patrons want the following kinds of materials:

- faith-based cures for cancer
- pornography
- bomb-making manuals.

Few students want to provide these materials merely because people ask for them (and I've had students who work in libraries tell me that, in fact, people *do* ask for these materials). Information can cause harm—to patrons, to others, to society. Should librarians perpetuate such harms, when they can reasonably identify them? While it is likewise reasonable to be wary of making these sorts of decisions for others, and to recognize that such judgments may also do harm, information systems and services are always going to be "for" something. This human element of information access is insufficiently articulated in Agre's vision.

At this point, my attempt to explain Librarians for Facts—what it did mean, what it might mean—stalled. I picked it up again at the end of the spring semester, as I prepared to teach my final session in another class, INLS 520.

Teaching INLS 520: Still life paintings and Grandma's peanut butter and jelly sandwiches

For the final session of INLS 520, my introductory master's level class in the organization of information,we read a lovely essay by the poet Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*.[20] *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* is the title of a 17th century still-life painting by the Dutch artist Jan Davidsz de Heem. The painting indeed features oysters, but it lavishes more attention upon a curling lemon peel around a half-filled wineglass. There is also a bunch of grapes on a rumpled green velvet cloth. Doty sees the painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and becomes a little bit obsessed by it, by how it reveals the magnificent beauty latent within the everyday world around us. Doty is fascinated with still life paintings, which are collections of mundane things to which artists have applied very particular attention. Doty's essay explores, amongst many other things, the nature of this attention, which can be very exuberant, as with the "bravura lemon peel" of de Heem, or piercingly calm, as with artist Adriaen Coorte's asparagus, gooseberries, and shells.

When students read Doty's essay, they were in the midst of working on their final papers for the class. Their project was to select two different ordering systems for similar sets of things, and to explain and compare the stories told through those ordering systems. (Examples of student projects for this assignment have included the story of potato chips as told through a convenience store and a supermarket, the story of emotions as told through two different psychological models, and the story of light fixtures at two different home improvement stores.) One of our goals in reading Doty's essay was to discuss how Doty's ruminations on the poetry of description via still life painting might also apply to the organization of young adult novels at the public library or men's dress shoes at Zappos.

Initially, the gulf between the attention of the still life artist and the attention of the many anonymous hands placing men's shoes in different categories seems very different, because the artist is making things from scratch, while the men's dress shoes is an arrangement of already-made things, and the person doing the arranging might be many people, or even a computer. But while those anonymous many hands arranging the men's shoes do not have the direct intentionality of the artist, those many hands also shape a story. By arranging the shoes, the anonymous hands of information organization also make the shoes what they are.

Describing is making, in other words. In discussing the still life artist's form of attention, Doty talks about the synthesis between seeing *clearly* and seeing *particularly:*

> *A painting of asparagus, a painting of gooseberries, a painting of five shells arranged on a shelf. Exactitude, yes, but don't these images offer us more than a mirroring report on the world? What is it that such a clear-eyed vision of the particular wishes to convey? A way to live, perhaps; a point of view, a stance toward things.*

Exactitude *entails* a stance toward things, a point of view, a way to live. Patrick Wilson's skeptical librarian is a fantasy! There is, in other words, a *stake* involved in the way that one constructs a particular form of exactitude. It is an expression of being *for* something: a point of view, a way to live.

In Doty's eyes, the particular exactitude of the still life artist is a form of poetry. Indeed, I read Doty's argument to suggest that all activities of description likewise express a point of view, a way to live, a stance toward things—and can be seen as poetry. However, many of these forms of attention are so minor, so mundane, so everyday, that their poetry eludes us. We notice the artist painting the asparagus but not the supermarket worker putting the asparagus into a particular location in the produce section. We notice the sculptor accentuating parts of women's bodies but not the cataloger putting a book about female beauty into HQ1219. It is much easier to see the art in "making from scratch" as opposed to assembling premade parts. Doty's essay clarifies that assembling from parts is its own form of attention that equally expresses a stance on things. It is a way of being *for* something, or caring about it.

In ruminating on how assembly from parts—activities like assigning a controlled vocabulary term to a resource—can be a poetic form of attention, I found myself thinking about the tiny old woman in Figure 2. She is my great grandmother, surrounded by her six children. We called her Grandma.

When I knew Grandma, she had made a particular choice not to cook, at all, ever, as a result of a dispute with her husband, Phil. The only hot meals I saw them eat at home were "tv dinners" from Swanson, or cans of Chunky Soup. (This was the kind of person Grandma was. She had an iron will. Grandma was the type of person who, when playing Old Maid or Candyland with two four-year-old girls, would play to win every time. In modern parlance, Grandma was a boss.)

Nonetheless, when Grandma was taking care of me and my twin sister, lunch was always special, although it was always the same. Grandma made open-face peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, always on presliced, packaged white bread, with creamy Jif peanut butter and Knotts Berry Farm boysenberry jam with seeds. We each got one sandwich. She cut it into four pieces, in exactly the same way every time. After lunch, we could select a cookie from the red tin on the top of the refrigerator. The cookies were kept in the tin, only to be retrieved at particular times, but they were

Figure 2. Grandma, in 1977, with Uncle Al, Uncle Benny, Auntie Katy, Auntie Mae, Uncle Chuck, and Nana (my grandmother).

packaged cookies: Nutter Butter or Chips Ahoy or pink rectangular wafers that did not have a name.

Lunch with Grandma was a unique experience forged through a singular form of attention, and it was all an assembly of premade parts. Nothing in that lunch was "made from scratch"! It was not like Jan de Heem's bravura lemon peel. But it *was* Grandma's boysenberry. We had that jam at home and the peanut butter and the bread but it was never the same. The way that all of the elements came together at Grandma's was a particular form of attention, made from putting things together in a particular way, in a certain context. My sister still remembers it too, just like me, although all Grandma was doing was providing a particular form of access to materials that she did not even make. Except the product—Grandma *did* make it, just like the supermarket worker with the asparagus or the cataloger with the book or the algorithm sorting the men's shoes at Zappos. Grandma made those premade things what they were, for us, by organizing and arranging them in a very particular way.

When I told this story to the students in my class, one of the students looked at me aghast and said: "Your Grandma made *open-face* peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?" like this was the sign of the apocalypse, like an open-face peanut butter and jelly sandwich was not really a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

I find this reaction instructive. Although I had not meant to, I had demonstrated that a "fact" of life that the student had assumed was similar for everyone was not so; there were different perspectives on it, just like the location of Vancouver. For some people, a normal peanut butter and jelly sandwich is open-faced! The difference between Grandma's peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and the location of Vancouver, however, is that my understanding of the former is completely based on my personal perspective, as formed through my unique circumstances. If I would have had a different grandma, I would probably think about peanut butter and jelly sandwiches differently. But how could it be otherwise with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches? Surely, we all make them according to our own tastes, often based in what we grew up doing? How could this be horrifying for my student?

The horror, I think, arose from a broader realization: it is not merely that our ideas of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are rooted in our own lived experiences, and what we believe and value, but that the location of Vancouver is *also* so rooted. A fear that seems absurd in the context of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches seems quite rational in the context of Vancouver: oh dear, what if I accidentally impose my worldview on the information that I provide, in a professional capacity, to other people? Whatever I might personally believe and value should not matter. I should provide … facts (as Luciano Floridi might describe Librarians for Facts). Or, I should enable people to make decisions on what constitutes facts, by documenting the evidentiary basis under which facts are constructed (as Phil Agre might describe Librarians for Facts). I should not have a personal stake in what facts might be! This is not my decision to make.

This position arises from an idealistic impulse: to respect user autonomy and enable users' own decisions regarding information utility and credibility, for example Furner.[21] But it misrepresents reality. As many have expressed, the ideal of neutrality is false.[22] Moreover, as philosopher of science Donna Haraway emphasizes, the supposed neutral position (which Haraway calls the "view from nowhere") is not just impossible; it is insidious.[23] To say that you are *for* enabling people to make their own decisions, with no regard for your own values and beliefs, is either unforgivably, willfully naive or consciously manipulative, because there is no way to accomplish that goal. Striving for the traditional notion of objectivity is *not* like tilting at windmills, noble but harmless.

In other words, it is not just absurd to imagine a common-sense, obvious, consensual way of making peanut butter sandwiches. It is *dangerous.* This may sound disturbingly like Kellyanne Conway, but science is objective in the same way that Fox News is objective: it is a group of people endorsing a certain set of evidentiary standards as being appropriate for certain purposes. The only way out of meaningless battles over being "more true" is to make a stand, to have a stake, to be *for* something that you believe in and value.

But this acknowledgement need not make us recoil in horror. The particularity of exactitude is precisely what we value in the still life artist, after all: the lemon peel's delirious bumpiness, or the lemon peel's ethereal smoothness. The sandwiches that our grandmas made for us, different as they are. The facts that we create through our many decisions about how to implement, maintain, and use information systems. What should we be providing access for? To disseminate the facts that we care about, the facts that we choose to make, for reasons that we are not afraid to proclaim. If we are *for* science, it is not because science "is facts"; it is because we value and believe in the evidentiary procedures that science currently endorses.

So, what are you for?

I cannot speak for "librarians," I can only speak for myself, and for the things that I value and believe in. I'll end this essay with some things I'm for, and the forms of information access that I envision to serve those goals. To be clear: my goal is methodological, not topical. I am sharing the process of working through my personal notions of value, with a brief illustration that demonstrates how those values might inform a proposal for a plan of action. But the proposal itself is not the point. When I suggest changes to existing systems, it is to demonstrate how the process of identifying one's own values can be directed towards concrete action. I'm not trying to convince anyone that my suggestions are the right ones. I'm sharing how my own beliefs, motivations, and proclivities lead me to a stance on things, and how that stance leads me to envision pathways for change. It is my hope that my example might be helpful in thinking about your own stance on things, and in envisioning how your own stance on things might then lead you to identify potential action.

In a recent essay titled "Design for Existential Crisis," Ann Light, Irina Shklovski, and Alison Powell present a set of qualities that speak to the current world, focusing on "the radical act of paying attention to things that we do not wish to see and that make us uncomfortable" as "the least we might do as we strive for the grace to accompany fellow-species to their own (and perhaps our) extinction".[24] Light, Shklovski, and Powell advocate the rejection of ease in the design of computing systems; designing systems to make them smoothly follow our will (or, in an alternate account, to facilitate our unthinking abdication of will to the system's logic), they assert, is "not serving us." Superficially easy systems contribute to a "fallacious" sense of comfort. In contrast, they propose that "We need to be capable of effort. We need to feel alive".[24]

I feel that the experiences of difficulty and discomfort that Light, Shklovski, and Powell seek to promote are especially necessary for information access. It is astoundingly easy to find the answers that you think you want when searching for information. As I taught INLS 201 this semester, I discovered, for example, that searching for some issue associated with fringe theories with the keyword "truth"— as in "vaccine autism truth" or "fluoride truth"—would inevitably produce results that made the fringe theory seem predominant and valid. It is easy to soothe yourself that you are right. We all enjoy that comforting feeling of certainty.

In our current historical moment, however, I feel that we, as a society, need to come to terms with the omnipresence of uncertainty. Is it possible to embrace uncertainty, rejecting the easy comfort of what appears, via a simple Google search, to be true? I feel this particularly with regards to data. A 2017 essay by Kai-Fu Lee in the *New York Times,* for example, describes the uptake of current artificial intelligence mechanisms (neural networks set loose on piles of "data") as a foregone eventuality in the corporate world.[25] One of Lee's examples is loan processing: with new forms of AI and appropriate data, human loan officers are totally unnecessary. A computer will be much better equipped to provide decisions on creditworthiness to the satisfaction of the lender. The kinds of AI described by

Lee are built to deliver certainty of profits, and, in Lee's opinion, they will do so. (Not might, or could; will.) Because the AI technology will clearly outperform people, Lee does not question its ascendance. Most of Lee's essay concerns how society might cope with the rampant inequality that will result from so many people being professionally displaced by AI. The displacement of people by AI is, for Lee, inevitable. (The remedy is to tax the corporations making these huge profits, and then to redistribute the wealth.)

Lee's essay made me think of the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. The certainty of AI delivers profits, and the dystopia of Pottersville. In Lee's essay, the way to avoid Pottersville is to use some of those profits to provide basic welfare. But in the movie, the lovely town of Bedford Falls survives because of its hero, George Bailey, who embraces the uncertainty of humanity. Perhaps there is another way to avoid the AI Pottersville: to be *for* an understanding of data that emphasizes its variability, its openness, and its uncertainty. People make decisions this way, not computers. Light, Shklovski, and Powell talk about this also: "Machines may excel at logic and rules, which can help maintain an equal society (and/or create conditions for control), but not graceful enactments of kindness and decency. It is humans who excel at discretion, empathy and compassion, going the extra distance where they feel the need".[24] The correct decision (in terms of Lee's example, the one that brings the most profit to the lender) is often not the humane decision. Given the challenges that our planet is up against, being correct capitalists—*for* narrow self-interest—may have devastating consequences.

So here is what I'm for: information access that is uncomfortable and difficult; that values uncertainty; that is created with, and to serve, compassion; that tries to be decent. What might that look like? How does that stance on things lead to action? Just to make this a little more concrete, I'll provide some illustrations for the library cataloging domain. Note that this list is about showing how my values and beliefs—what I'm for—might lead me to endorse certain ways of doing things. Once again, my goal is to demonstrate a process that integrates reflection with action, not to convince anyone that my thinking is best. With that caveat in place, here are some possibilities that my convictions suggest.

- Search interfaces that exploit, rather than hide, metadata structure (and an encoding scheme that enables this). Metadata structure—like subject headings—enables a variety of analytic actions upon bibliographic data. Metadata structure does not always make search easier, in terms finding a list of results that match the ideas in your brain. But it does make search more powerful, in terms of being able to construct and compare

sets of resources that have some kind of relationship to each other. The activity of searching can be a means to understand and assess these relationships. In other words: search interfaces can help you comprehend and critique a collection, rather than just produce items associated with a keyword. Searching should be about interpretation, not retrieval.
- Authorship and provenance documentation for catalog records, to display who is responsible for what statements, when. (This establishes the catalog as a collection of statements written by particular people.)
- More local variation for catalog records, and the ability to compare variant records across institutions for the same work, so that multiple accounts can be read and interpreted by information seekers.

If you are a cataloger, do you read such a list in exasperation, thinking that these ideas are impossible, or that they violate current standard practice, or that they could only happen after someone else decides to change practice (like getting rid of MARC)? Or maybe you observe that others have repeatedly made similar suggestions: for instance, the first point could be seen as a restatement of Cutter's second objective, and as such the sort of "stance on things" advocated by Seymour Lubetzky in his emphasis on relationships between editions of works, carried forth into Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR).[26–28]

Indeed, I would say. Now I would invite you to tell me: what *is* the current library catalog for? Explain it to me like I'm Allyson, and then ask yourself: are you for that? What *are* you for? And how can you make it so?

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Notes

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