Ron Day, Professor, Dept. of Information and Library Science, SICE

• A long time ago I used the term “critical information theory” to describe my research. It wasn’t a popular term among those who called themselves information scientists, on the one hand, or library scientists on the other; the first who saw it as un-, or even anti-scientific, and the second who saw it as ‘theory,’ as opposed to ‘practice’ in libraries or other information institutions and professions. It has gained some popularity recently, though.

• Critical Information Theory or Studies underlies my research and that of my colleagues in the Department of Information and Library Science to various degrees.
Critical Information Theory (‘CRIT’)/Critical Information Studies:

• What do these terms refer to?
  • Historically, conceptually, and through examining social, cultural and technical affordances, critical information theory/studies examine representationalist notions of knowledge and information and how they occur and what they mean.
Some examples:

• Why do we think that the world or institutions of knowledge (e.g., ‘science’) can be represented in documents or as ‘information’?
• Why do we think that books and other documents ‘contain’ information and knowledge? What do we mean when we say this document is “about” x?
• What are documents evidence of?
• What do we mean by “information” or “data” or “knowledge”?
• How are we mediated by old and new information infrastructures, documents, data, algorithms, and by techniques of machine learning?
• How and why do we think of personal and social identities in terms of categories or documentary types?
• Why do we think that libraries or Google are the keepers or indexers of the world’s knowledge?
Another example: a documentation view of information and libraries or other types of collections and indexes

• ---the modern claim that knowledge is represented in information or documents (especially books), which are contained in libraries. And today, that search indexes, such as Google, organize and keep the world’s knowledge, and therefore, libraries (or Google or ‘the internet’) are where knowledge is found.
But we should object that...

• Libraries are data centers—they are “centers of calculation” as Bruno Latour says, in long chains of research and knowledge production.
  • The notion of libraries or any other collection or index as ends of knowledge is rather recent, though it comes from a long philosophical and theological tradition.

• “Science,” and knowledge more generally, are constructed by institutions and cultural forms, and social and technical devices.

• Textual and visual representations of science (e.g., science or knowledge maps or other ‘information’) have no unmediated privilege over other links in the chain of knowledge production and use, and indeed they often mask such chains and their social and cultural contingencies in practices and aesthetics of representation.
Another example: documentary identities in the social sciences and in psychology

• The notion that individually we are essentialist *types* of people—women, men, racial and ethnic identities, and national identities; and that we have core and completely knowable selves.
  • This are metaphysical assumptions, still very prevalent in our everyday folk psychology and sociology.
From Social Informatics to Critical Information Theory

• The last stage of Rob Kling’s social informatics examined the *a priori* categories and judgments that function in computer science and more broadly in digital information. He saw critical studies, such as ethics, as necessary and foundational for computer and information studies, that is, for understanding centers and devices of calculation.

• In library and information studies (LIS), however, centers and devices of calculation for data and documents, that is, ‘computation,’ are seen as reaching back to antiquity and are the foundations for civilization and ‘knowledge.’ The historical warrant for critical information theory/studies in LIS is much older than digital computation.
Critical information theory, critique, and reengineering the real

- **Critical information theory** is looking at the information and knowledge worlds and asking what are the *a priori* concepts operating in theories, methods, techniques, and judgements there?

- **Critical information theory** analyses both practices and the normative explanations of practices in order to **critique** and **reengineer** our practices and normative understandings through critically understanding how these came to be.
THANK YOU

roday@Indiana.edu

http://info.slis.indiana.edu/~roday/