Analyzing the Laws of MIL: a Five-step Scientific Conversation on Critical Information Literacy

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Abstract

This essay mixes epistemological considerations on truth and science, a critical information literacy exercise on the 5 Laws of MIL (Media and Information Literacy), LIS theory and international experience reports. It is constructed in five parts, in line with the 5 Laws of Media and Information Literacy (Grizzle & Singh, 2016) and Ranganathan's laws (1931). First, a critique of the Laws of MIL is presented; then a specific social context puts the first part into perspective; the feedback from the international community on the first two is followed by new research on library/MIL laws; and finally, matters of space, readers, staff and mutation are addressed in order to open the theme to other interlocutors and experiences that enrich the conversation. It concludes that the scientific method is neither perfectly objective nor completely useless: it has to be understood as a social construction. Furthermore, to put information neutrality utopia definitely behind us, we should expose our biases, rather than pretend to erase them, as a way to build a new trust in science.

Keywords: critical information literacy, media and information literacy, social theory, scientific method, post-truth, biased method

Perspectives edited by Stewart Brower

I was writing in the tradition of immanent critique that seeks to provoke critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the movement of thought to which it belongs. There was and remains warrant for such a mode of criticism and to distinguish between self-criticism that promises a more democratic and inclusive life for the movement and criticism that seeks to undermine it altogether.

Preface of 1999 "Gender Trouble" edition (Butler, 2010, p. vii)

Introduction

What is science? The unveiling of the truth? The proof of the laws of nature? Or something biased by politics, corrupted by pride, and ruined by financial interests? Most certainties and criticisms from both modern and postmodern traditions are challenged by recent post-truth phenomena and their consequences in our societies. In the spirit of a conscious critique from within, as Butler (2010) says in the epigraph, I propose that the scientific method is neither perfectly objective nor completely useless: it has to be understood as a construction, made by people, for people, with people's qualities and weaknesses, possibilities and goals.

Our feelings (which for a long time were seen as unimportant or even harmful) are now considered more important than facts and are taking the center of all decisions. But how are they formed? Is there a "pure" emotion, an inner opinion, or are feelings—as everything else—created within our context: that is, our cultural, social, political, economical, physical, historical, geographical (the list is endless), and personal experiences?

This paper intends to look at science (in general and to Library and Information Science—LIS—specifically) as a systematic approach to knowledge, socially constructed in a conversation or, as Grizzle and Singh (2016, p. 25–26) say, Ranganathan's ideal of "meeting of minds."

It is constructed in five parts, in line with the Laws of Media and Information Literacy (Grizzle & Singh, 2016), based on Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science. The first movement was the abstract submitted to the 2018 Global MIL Week. The Five Laws of MIL discourse were analyzed from a critical point of view, to understand how it could be even more inclusive. The second movement emerged from the preparation for the conference presentation. Influenced by our context, Brazilian controversial elections, the presentation was prepared with a new perspective. The session called "Theorizing MIL Cities with a people focus: reflections on the Five Laws of MIL" is the third moment, based on the rich dialogue between a research and its audience. The fourth part explains the

origins of the Five Laws of MIL, then dives into Ranganathan's Laws, and finally, the fifth section presents some challenges and possibilities for continuous work towards MIL.

Figure 1 - The Five Laws of MIL, graphic version
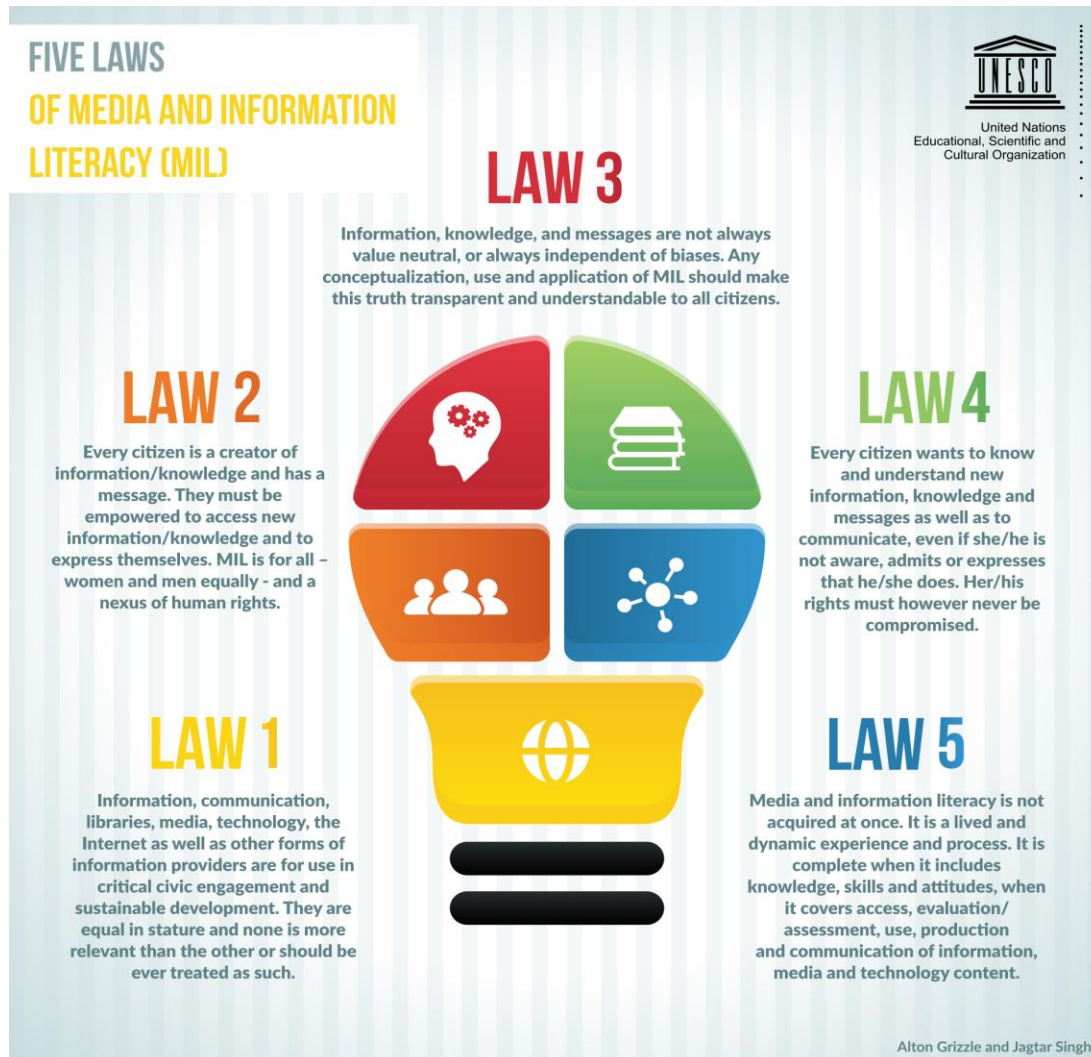
Source: http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/mil_five_laws_english.png

First movement: Laws are for criticism

Media and Information Literacy is the most important set of competencies for every person in every country to understand their current world and prepare for a better future. This major theme has been relentlessly approached by UNESCO, which produced a set of fundamental documents to guide people and nations towards MIL's adoption and dissemination.

One of my favorite instruments is the graphic version of the Five Laws of MIL. It has many qualities: it is concise, visually attractive, and perfect to reach people from all horizons. However, some of its implicit thoughts can be misleading. In this sense, this investigation is a critical exercise of the Five Laws of MIL.

Each law will be analyzed for its wording, meanings, the confusions it may convey, and finally the overall document, through French discourse analysis.

The main points for consideration are gender binary language, social construction of information, information neutrality, and people's desires for information, as well as information ethics and critique.

Enlightened by Butler (2010), let's pay attention to gender binary language. Despite the idea of gender equality and all the important actions towards Goal 5 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals—to guarantee girls and women the same rights as men— we should not forget that many people do not feel represented by the binary definition. They do not fit themselves in a male or female categorization, and the his/her language—intended to be more inclusive—could actually be oppressive. Especially in English, little changes can make significant difference, like employing generic words such as people or human beings and pronouns like they/theirs.

Although Law 3 states that information is socially constructed by people immersed in a certain culture and therefore subject to its influence, it also points out that "information, knowledge and messages are not always valued neutral or always independent of bias." If we are to overcome the false promise of objectivity brought by modern science while avoiding postmodern scepticism, it is necessary to put "information neutrality" behind and embrace the need to understand a wide range of specific conditions around any piece of information in order to perceive it a little better.

Information neutrality is just as utopic as the possibility of being completely Media and Information Literate. As with Law 3, I fully agree with Law 5, which states that MIL is a lifelong dynamic process. The problem is seeing literacy as a finite objective. Braman (2006) analyzes a "global emergent information policy regime" where technology, laws, state frontiers, and financial interests are all elements factored in understanding information production and dissemination. The belief that one can fully achieve information literacy— that is, know everything around information—seems impossible. Whereas if we understand MIL as a state of constant alertness, we can relinquish the finish line and enjoy the ride.

MIL, understood as a basic human right that must be ensured and defended, is a great idea. But the principles found in Law 4, on what people supposedly want, are not convincing. It is tricky to speak about one's wishes and desires. Instead, we should make sure these rights are widely communicated and reinforced.

In addition to criticism about the wording found in some laws, there is the matter of the absence of the fundamental idea of ethics, especially as it was recently included in the definition of information literacy in key documents such as ACRL (2015) and CILIP (2018).

The conference paper aimed to be a constructive contribution to UNESCO's efforts, as part of a global team united to advocate for MIL's dissemination around the world and for the empowerment of all people.

Second movement: Every scientist his/her/their context

As context is key to understand information, the first turn of general elections took place in Brazil during the preparation for the Global MIL Week presentation. Since 2016, the country's constitution and institutions have been jeopardized by a corrupt government, in a public battle between corrupted institutions as Congress, the judiciary and media, supposedly to stop corruption. This is our "democracy."

When the campaign started, Workers' Party candidate and former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (popularly called Lula) was arrested on charges of corruption. A legal battle for his candidacy started and ended 20 days before the first round, when Fernando Haddad, former Minister of Education and former mayor of São Paulo, became the official presidential candidate.

During the first part of the campaign, the far right grew in polls, and fake news was widespread, as seems to be standard nowadays. But the election of so many far-right governors and members of congress could not be foreseen. Even if centrists or moderate left and right politicians could overcome differences to fight extremism in the second round, the states and Congress bodies had already been turned.

While considering if the word "always" in Law 3 is a disservice to MIL's dissemination, the whole critical exercise seemed pointless. All I thought about were dystopias like 1984 (Orwell, 1949), The Handmaid's Tale (Atwood, 1985), or the fact that Iranian women wore bikinis in the 1970s and now they wear burkas.

The conclusion is that the very idea of "critical theory" (Horkheimer, 1937) is at stake here. Science is not neutral; it should aim to improve people's lives. If there was only one use or goal for Media and Information Literacy, it should be to prevent a man who diminishes women, praises torture, incites gun violence, and discriminates against many groups of people from becoming president of Latin America's biggest country. But we failed.

Third movement: Every presentation its audience

Session 3b was entitled "Theorizing MIL cities with a people focus: Reflections on the Five Laws of MIL." The auditorium was full and both authors of the document I was about to critique were present. The other presenters discussed a MIL curriculum for young citizens of a smart city and the idea of an infrastructure literacy (USA); formal, informal, and non-formal education (Brazil); the digital divide between developed and developing world (Egypt); and the Five Laws of MIL as a way to theorize therapy and treat children in tsunami-stricken areas (Japan). From the diversity of the themes, we can notice that the laws of MIL are being developed as a basis for very different theories worldwide.

It is a special moment when researchers are able to get feedback from people who are, at the same time, acquainted with (or interested in) the subject but not as intimate with certain perspectives. The first comment was about how important it is, in a major international conference, to have a moment to discuss MIL theory. Encouraging criticism and a theoretical dialogue was praised more than once. As a concept that demands lifelong (during the entire life) and lifewide (throughout every aspect of life) training and practice, it is, in fact, crucial to keep reflecting on MIL as context changes and brings new challenges.

Someone questioned the term "law," as it seemed rigid and outdated. Someone else pointed out that Ranganathan meant to say mantra in the original text. The authors explained that the term law is a statement of the importance of MIL and a metaphor in the sense of Ranganathan's laws: not as a legal rule to be followed, but more as an observation of the general way MIL should work.

Finally, a librarian pointed out that the term *citizenship* can be even more excluding than binary language. In the face of increasing migration waves (motivated by religious or political persecution or to escape misery), citizenship is not available for all. The mediator clarified that when UNESCO says citizenship it refers to global citizens of the world, not a specific nation, thus being as inclusive as it gets. Some political considerations were raised,

and although the general discussions were very serious, the session ended with a hopeful tone.

Fourth movement: Save the time of the researcher

It is fascinating to hear about another scientist's thought process and path to conclusions. If scholarship is a conversation (ACRL, 2015), we do not always enter it right at the beginning or understand every reference. Another great advantage of meeting colleagues in person is the possibility to learn about the surrounding context of a research and its controversies.

It was really helpful (and time-saving) to retrace the origins of the authors' thoughts. The idea behind the Five Laws of MIL (Grizzle & Singh, 2016) is to extrapolate Ranganathan's vision about the social construction of knowledge in a Saramago style: imagining what Ranganathan would think/write if he lived today, when information can flow through the internet, media, and telecommunications instantly around the world.

Back to the original source, "The Five Laws of Library Science" (Ranganathan, 1931) I found a delightful reading. A serious yet simple text, mixing examples of prejudice and inequality with practical tips to diminish them. From general assertions to technical specificities, the author strolls through a universal library and solves different kinds of problems, making us imagine how wonderful it would be if all barriers to knowledge were lifted.

The Laws are elementary statements that few people openly contest, and even fewer put into practice:

1. Books are for use: not for preservation, not for exhibition, not for completing a collection. They ought to be out of the shelf, borrowed, in someone's hand or bag: books are to be read. Human dialogue is fostered when recorded knowledge can be accessed and used to inform new ideas. Aspects such as open access, library location, opening hours, spatial arrangements, shelf organization, and especially staff selection have to be thought with this "mantra" (Ranganathan, 1931, p. 20) in mind.

2. Every reader his/her book: means education is for every person, regardless of sex, gender, age, social class, and every other distinction imaginable. He gives the example of elites being afraid that education would make the poor rebel, but only until they needed workers to read to follow instructions, and of men doubting women's intellectual capacity, until realizing they were wasting half of the country's human resources. The same goes for people in the countryside, the disabled, the

imprisoned, the illiterate—the list goes on. There is no exception to this law: every living person has the right to his/her/their book.

3. Every book its reader: From the knowledge perspective, this law states that human ideas should be widespread. If someone took the time to develop and publish a book (i.e., container of knowledge), it must be of use to someone else. He again talks about the space (highlighting new or rare books), the readers (how to attract them with a newspaper section, for instance) or the staff (proposing weekly themes or hosting cultural events), in order to "sell" their product to a larger number.

4. Save the time of the reader: although it may seem that this chapter is all about technical descriptions of library processes, the idea here is to maximize efficiency (like in business administration) in order to free time of readers and staff, so they can concentrate on fulfilling the other laws. The laws are hierarchically arranged from the most important/general to the most specific and they look at human knowledge from different points of view (books, readers, non-readers who should be readers, staff and the library institution per se), and they all point to one goal: access to information.

5. The library is a growing organism: finally the library institution is considered as a living being. It has to keep changing in order to maintain itself alive. It will obviously grow, as population increases and people keep researching and publishing new ideas. He looks at this growth as in previous laws, from multiple physical aspects: number of volumes (and the space needed), of readers, and of staff members. At last, he considers something I believe inspired Grizzle and Singh (2016): the library evolution. As life does, it adapts, mutates, and is supposed to become something entirely different in shape and content in order to keep its purpose.

    What further stages of evolution are in store for this GROWING ORGANISM—the library— we can only wait and see. Who knows that a day may not come [...] when the dissemination of knowledge, which is the vital function of libraries, will be realized by libraries even by means other than those of the printed book? (Ranganathan, 1931, p. 414).

This reading brings new light to the Five Laws of MIL, whether in accordance or to propose new topics for revision, as the matter of Open Access/Open Science, so dear to

Ranganathan, and the fact that MIL education is supposed to save the time of everyone but only if considered as central as investments in telecom infrastructure, for instance. As this topic seems to be as exciting as endless, I invite others to continue reflecting on that.

Fifth movement: Science is a growing organism

As did Ranganathan (1931), this section is organized into different points of view: space, readers, mutation, and staff. The venue (space) of the MIL Conferences was another experience that contributed greatly to our perception of MIL, LIS, and science in general. Lithuania and Latvia were the selected countries; Kaunas and Riga, respectively, the conference cities. Kaunas is a beautiful small historical city, largely under renovation since being selected as the European Cultural Capital of 2022. The city has developed a connection between its historical sites and a contemporary cultural life, as shown in several themed maps (Design, Architecture, Sougihara Route, among others) and the hashtag #kaunastic, showing potential to become a MIL City.

Riga is a magnificent European capital with medieval, modern, and futuristic buildings. The highlight of my visit, the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, is an associative museum funded by donations. The museum exhibits the sixty year occupation of the region, including Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Firstly, the three countries were "called" in a pact with Soviet Union, which sent troops in 1939; then occupied by Nazi Germany in 1940; re-occupied by the USSR when Germany lost the war; and finally regained independence in the 1990s, after Perestroika.

As said in the second movement, Brazilians were faced with a choice that divided the nation. Search algorithms stimulate incoherent polarization, filtering personal preferences based on past navigation. People (readers) were either tagged as members of a bank robber gang (*#petralhas*) or stupid irrational small creatures (*#bolsominions*).

For algorithms there is no different path: it is 0 or 1, black or white. For human complexity it becomes quite different, since we can see many shades of grey. But it seems that digital mediation in our everyday life is having some unexpected and possibly harmful consequences (mutation). The conclusion from the museum visit is that there is no good totalitarian regime. Left or right (and every variation in between), we are people. We should never reduce or accept to be reduced into an artificial binary opposition.

As elections are past, we are presented with the Herculean task of bursting the "this versus that" bubble, making an effort to understand each other and re-establish a human

connection. When students ask what they can do to escape the algorithm prison, I always answer that offline meetings are still relevant to move beyond similar patterns and comfort zones.

In this sense, as other students and researchers in our program were working with related themes and had also participated in six information literacy international events, we decided to get together to share, in Portuguese, in person and online, our research and global experiences (staff).

The afternoon called MIL Dialogues revolved around two main themes: MIL Critics and MIL Genders. Figure 2 shows a summary of the event. The more experiences are shared, the more projects can be developed and the more people can be educated in MIL, in a critical and gender-inclusive way.

Figure 2 - MIL Dialogues in short

Source: MIL Dialogues production crew (@forumcoinfo)

Final considerations

This paper involved different approaches, such as an experience report, scientific research on MIL critique, Ranganathan/LIS, algorithms, and epistemological/philosophical considerations on what is truth or science. Firstly, a critical information literacy exercise on the Laws of MIL were presented; then a social context that puts the first part into perspective; followed by the feedback from the international community; the continuous

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dialogue in the form of a new research on library/MIL laws; and finally, opening the theme to other interlocutors and experiences that enrich the conversation.

As with all research, there is a lot more to read and comment on. For instance, some other Brazilian thoughts on Ranganathan's Five Laws (Lucas, Corrêa, & Eggert-Steindel, 2016), on the Five Laws of MIL (Dudziak, Ferreira, & Ferrari, 2017), and the social construction of taste from a critical and informational view (Schneider, 2015). Readers are encouraged to pursue this direction, since Brazilian research on MIL, LIS, and critical social theory is abundant.

In order to try to answer the question that introduced this paper, I started to believe that this, here, is science, or at least, a new form of it: Science 4.0, or whatever version people are creating now. As I struggle to compose my thesis, all these questions—the value of science in the pursuit of reality, truth or social change; the choices about which theory and methodology to work with, the weight of European white male hegemony and how to escape it—made me wonder if instead of fighting bias we should not be embracing it.

Inspired by the 30th anniversary of Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional theory, and the recent contact with decolonial studies (Dussel, 2016; Silva, 2019), the idea of a "biased method," where the main choices and ideas that compose the arguments are contextualized, pointing out its inclinations instead of trying to mask or erase them, has been growing on me. If you are curious, bothered or even excited by this, feel free to get in touch and help keep this conversation alive.

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