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Theory of Information and Communication

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7.1 Information Disintermediation and Intermediation in the Digital Environment



The emergence of social networks has caused a significant shift in the system of reference and cultural assignments, leading to a loss of the intellectual intermediary's influence in the processes of cultural transmission.

As explored throughout the course, the foundations of the current concept of the “Information Society” were laid during the 1960s and 1970s, with the hope that investment in technology would generate wealth and well-being in various aspects (social, political, economic, etc.). The significant impact on information consumption and access has been observed, evolving from computers, connectivity, and search engines to the current environment dominated by social networks and the prevalence of participation in digital spaces.

This participation has not always led to the creation of democratic spaces, as the same platforms that have served to connect and keep us in touch also drive polarization, the spread of false information, the promotion of hatred, and authoritarianism.

Throughout this course, we have examined how these phenomena have been studied from different disciplines (Sociology, Information Science, Communication), using terms ranging from broad concepts like post-truth to more specific ones like disinformation and fake news. Similarly, the mechanisms that foster these phenomena, such as biases and the so-called filter bubble effect, have been addressed. These efforts represent attempts to understand and tackle the complex reality of today's informational landscape.

According to Cordon and Alonso (2011), the figure of the mediation, which was once essential for building a logical and coherent discourse in cultural production and consumption, has seen its importance reduced due to the dispersion and multiplicity of discourses that characterize the new media context. This has led to the democratization of opinion, rather than knowledge, allowing anyone to express themselves and spread information without a clear standard to regulate its truthfulness.

Disintermediation has affected cultural legitimization, as social networks and digital platforms have changed the ways knowledge is validated. Trust in traditional intermediaries has decreased, and users now seek references and validations in a broader and less structured environment.

Ávila Araújo (2023) perfectly summarizes the characteristics of information disintermediation as a concept that refers to the perception that we can access information directly without the mediation of recognized institutions or authorities. The key concepts of this phenomenon are summarized as follows:

- **Definition:** Disintermediation does not mean that information is truly devoid of mediation; instead, it refers to the illusion that some individuals can access information without intermediaries. This perception fosters distrust toward traditional information mediation channels (p. 2).
- **Current determining context:** This phenomenon arises where the legitimacy of institutions traditionally mediating information, such as journalism and science, is being questioned. It is associated with the proliferation of fake news, conspiracy theories, and hate speech, all of which aim to undermine trust in these institutions (p. 1).
- **Issue of trust:** Disintermediation is closely linked to a lack of trust in established knowledge systems. As people feel increasingly disconnected from reliable information sources, they tend to seek information through unverified channels, which can spread misinformation (p. 2).

Ávila Araújo (2023) draws on the work of Anthony Giddens to frame his study on disintermediation and to highlight the importance of expert systems in modern society. He particularly contextualizes the phenomenon of disinformation and the distrust toward intermediary institutions, demonstrating how these issues are tied to broader changes in modernity and social organization. Ávila Araújo references *The Consequences of Modernity* (1999), a classic work for understanding social transformations, as well as the role of trust in modern institutions, which is crucial for analyzing the disintermediation of information and the legitimacy of intermediary institutions (such as

educational systems, the press, etc.). In the cultural sphere, libraries, archives, and museums are cited as classic intermediary institutions that have played a crucial role in the selection, preservation, organization, and dissemination of human knowledge. These institutions are seen as information mediators that help democratize access to knowledge and strive for diversity in their collections and actions, promoting justice and equal opportunities. However, they have also been subject to scrutiny and criticism from various groups or political sectors.

Building a strong narrative to support both the profession and libraries and archives is essential in a shifting context of heightened polarization and confrontation, where public institutions are frequently questioned. As part of an increasingly evident cultural battle, Europe is already experiencing growing challenges to library spaces, censorship, and debates regarding the neutrality of professionals (Martínez Cardama, 2024).

In response to disintermediation, libraries have had to adapt and redefine their roles. Rather than simply serving as physical repositories of books, libraries are becoming more dynamic, interactive spaces that facilitate access to digital content, promote digital literacy, and guide users through the information overload

Moreover, there are new ways of intermediation for libraries in the physical space. The concept of **social infrastructure** refers to the essential public institutions and spaces that contribute to the fabric of society, shaping the public space and fostering community interaction. The term 'social infrastructure' was popularised by Klinenberg (2018, p. 11), who describes it as: 'the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact'. Public libraries are highlighted as prime examples of social infrastructure that contribute to the social life of cities, being accessible and inclusive spaces for community meetings (Melik and Hazeleger, 2024).

Barclay (2017) therefore argues that the library space – in and of itself – is perhaps the most valuable amenity it has to offer, rather than its role as an information provider:

Just what is so special about public library space? It is special because it is unique. No space quite like public library space has managed to survive the changes wrought by an increasingly privatised and security-obsessed world (Barclay, 2017, p. 240).

Libraries are reinventing themselves as community centers, innovation labs, and makerspaces (Klinenberg, 2018; Barniskis, 2016). These public institutions act as intermediaries by guiding individuals toward opportunities for education, recreation, and civic engagement. At this point, we need to tackle the idea of third spaces coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, refers to places that are neither home nor work but are essential for fostering social connections, interaction, and community building. Libraries, community centers, and parks are prime examples of third spaces. These institutions provide a neutral ground for individuals to interact, engage in social activities, and create a sense of belonging outside the formal structures of family and work. Oldenburg envisions the library as an essential social agent, a space apart from home, work, or school, where educational and civic processes can be strengthened. Libraries are forums for continuous and shared learning, places that open up to the community, preparing individuals for the new challenges that the appropriation of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) will impose on them.

With regard to this social mission, there are three essential values of public libraries:

- 1. Empowering Communities.** Libraries empower individuals and communities through initiatives that encourage civic engagement, personal growth, and lifelong learning.
- 2. Promoting Social Integration and Employability** They also enhance employability by offering job search assistance, career workshops, and skill-building programs that prepare individuals for evolving labour market demands.
- 3. Bridging the Digital Divide.** By providing training in digital and informational skills, they help users navigate the complexities of the modern world, empowering them to succeed in an increasingly digital society.

Public libraries, whose origins date back to the 19th century, have consistently been defined by their remarkable ability to evolve. This evolution is reflected in their ongoing review of missions and objectives to adapt to new social realities. Over time, libraries have embraced several changes:

- **Adaptation to technological developments:** Libraries have integrated digital tools and online resources to remain relevant and they continue to meet the high demand for access to the latest technologies among the public.
- **Development of new services:** They have incorporated modern marketing trends to better understand and meet the needs of their communities.
- **Adjustment to the Information Society:** Libraries have transformed to address the demands of a society increasingly reliant on information access and literacy.

Public libraries play a role in fostering digital inclusion and empowering individuals and communities in the information age.

We can summarise these contributions for digital empowerment in three ways:

- **Window:** A gateway to access all kinds of information and knowledge.
- **Pillar for the Community:** A driving force for social improvement (Suaiden, 2002).
- **Strengthening democratic Discourse:** civic spaces.
- **Meeting Point:** A place for connection and collaboration (Kranich, 2012).

This empowering role of libraries is clearly outlined in the UNESCO Manifesto (1994 and 2022), which highlights the purpose of public libraries as essential institutions for personal and community development.

The updated **IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (2022)** emphasizes the vital role of libraries in promoting access to knowledge, inclusivity, and lifelong learning. It highlights libraries as key social agents, essential to empowering communities and individuals. Libraries are seen as democratic spaces that foster education, digital literacy, and citizenship. They are crucial in addressing challenges posed by the digital divide and ensuring equitable access to information for all (UNESCO, 2023) (Figure 1).

IFLA-UNESCO

Public Library Manifesto

2022

The public library creates conditions for:

- the development of a democratic society and active citizenship
- lifelong learning, independent decision and cultural development of the individual and social groups

It is:

- the local information centre
- a creator of community

It provides all citizens with:

- equal and free access to library funds and services
- access to information of all types
- services in library premises, including remote access

It provides people with specific needs:

- special services and documents

Supports:

- formal and informal education
- reading, media, information and digital literacy
- personal development, creativity, cultural diversity
- creation and sharing of knowledge
- open access to scientific knowledge
- preserving and making cultural heritage available

Not subject to:

- censorship
- commercial pressures

It is:

- financed from public funds
- well located and equipped
- sufficiently staffed and materially provided
- professionally managed
- incorporated into relevant legislation and long-term strategies



Let's support the development of public libraries and the national network of libraries!

www.ifla.org/g/public-libraries/public-library-manifesto/

Figure 1 IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto <https://www.ifla.org/public-library-manifesto/#:~:text=The%20IFLA%20UNESCO%20Public%20Library%20Manifesto%20proclaims%20UNESCO's%20belief%20in,the%20minds%20of%20all%20people.>

Other associations, like American Library Association (ALA) highlights the role of libraries as inclusive, participatory community centers through the concept of "The Es of Libraries": Education, Employment, Entrepreneurship, Empowerment, and Engagement". This framework underscores how libraries contribute to lifelong learning, support job and entrepreneurial opportunities, empower individuals, and foster active civic participation, making libraries essential hubs for community development and growth. These five pillars reflect the transformative impact libraries have on society.

Libraries are transforming their spaces into true community hubs for technological experimentation, such as maker spaces. These spaces offer tools like 3D printers, crafting materials, and computers for design and prototyping. Libraries with maker spaces encourage creativity, entrepreneurship, and technical skills, making them dynamic hubs for community learning.

Through these initiatives, public libraries play a pivotal role in empowering citizens, supporting their personal and professional development, and strengthening the social fabric of communities.