Investigating, Writing and Teaching Social Justice Themes in Library and Information Studies

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Abstract

As a social scientific discipline, Library and Information Studies (LIS) connect with other information service-oriented professions, and fields of investigation. Its curricula and research publications include topics and themes connected to the everyday information lives of people, communities, and organizations. To effectively design and deliver appropriate library and information services, social justice should feature prominently too in its pedagogies and practices, as well as its conference programmes, journals and other writings. Social justice research and literature emerge in varied formulations, and under different guises. A challenge is how to give its topics and themes local relevance, and meaningful application. This essay emphasises the importance of investigating, teaching, writing and publishing about social justice themes. Two case studies from South Africa's library and information sector discuss the social justice concepts of decolonisation and whistleblowing. Arguments about decolonising library collections shaped by racial prejudice in the 'old' South Africa are reviewed. And the challenges that a whistleblower for information justice faced in the 'new' South Africa are deconstructed. The essay recommends fuller investigation and reliable documentation for teaching and publication of its themes and lessons.

Keywords: decolonisation, library and information studies, research, social justice, teaching, whistleblowing.

Introduction

For their meaningful impact, global concepts, projects and programmes should be locally relevant. The United Nations' *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDG Resource Centre, 2024) and UNESCO's *Information for All Programme* (African Centre 2018, p. 31) feature among noble initiatives for social justice, and for peaceful and prosperous coexistence within and among the world's nations. What cannot be overlooked is how past events in their countries continue to shape present challenges. Nor can the nebulous nature of social justice in its several forms and labels be ignored in contexts where and when they are discussed and applied.

In the United States, for example, Alabama State's *Southern Poverty Law Centre* (Teaching Tolerance, 2018) constructed an anti-bias framework to teach tolerance as a way of challenging social injustice.

That framework prescribed learning outcomes and standards, and its domains included identity, diversity, justice, and action. Among its elements and principles were access to resources, equity, participation, and human rights. A few years later another framework for curriculum redesign, elsewhere in the United States, added inclusion and fairness in education (Van Damme, 2022). And far away in Maribyrnong, an inner-city Melbourne suburb in Australia, a 'social justice' framework for 2023-2033 lists equity, inclusion and resilience as its goals (Maribyrnong City Council, 2022). Recent frameworks across countries, and for different professions and purposes, include similarly desired outcomes, but they do not necessarily share the same elements, and principles.

As an applied social scientific discipline Library and Information Studies (*LIS*), which connects with information service-oriented professions and sectors, embrace related domains, principles and values. Its curricula include aims, themes, and strategies that target the everyday information lives of people, communities, and organizations. In order to design and deliver effective and appropriate information services, social justice topics and themes should feature as staple items. Their presence should be prominent too in *LIS* pedagogies, research practices and literature, as well as its conferences, seminars, workshops, and programmes focused on community engagement.

In that way, students and teachers, as well as researchers and the general public readership of its literature and reports *et cetera* would have wider access to these topics and themes. That will embed an understanding of the concept and principles of social justice in a *LIS* disciplinary framework.

Research problem

Although such a framework would be helpful across the types of libraries, and transferable to and from other information sector agencies such as archives and museums, its special features and challenges should be addressed. There are social injustice shifts and it is not the same everywhere, nor ever-present. History matters, and conditions and circumstances change over time across the world's regions, countries, cities and suburbs. Social justice in *LIS* curricula should therefore emphasise topics and themes of compelling community interest to engage both the past and present through investigation, writing, teaching, as well as in-service training in preparation for practice. Another important challenge is that, although not explicitly identified or labelled as such, social justice themes are not entirely new.

They have already featured in the *LIS* literature under different guises and in related formulations.

Over two decades ago the authors of an article in the *South African Journal of Library and Information Science* discussed 'Information Poverty and Information Justice'. Johannes Britz and James Blignaut had developed a 'moral framework', based on social justice. They identified problems and possible solutions for what they formulated as 'information poverty', which was understood as the inability to access information. They argued that equality in the right of access to information is necessary for development. And that:

> "… certain inequalities in the different social and economic activities should be to everybody's advantage and based on equal opportunities" (Britz & Blignaut, 2001, p. 68).

That is one example of how social justice and social injustice had already, both implicitly and directly, featured in South African *LIS* literature. Ideas about social justice were prominent too in discussion about the *LIS Transformation Charter* (2014) that had been formulated subsequently for the 'new' South Africa.

Reflecting on the "politics, processes, and promises" of that *Charter*, two of its authors had characterised libraries as the "Cornerstones of Democracy" (Hart & Nassimbeni, 2016). They elaborated Britz's (2004) subsequent moral reflection on information poverty, and explained that:

> "The social injustice of information poverty cuts off certain groups from the social and economic mainstream, reducing them to the status of second-class citizens" (Hart & Nassimbeni, 2016, p. 201).

Britz returned to the idea of social justice in 2021 in a book essay sub-titled: "A reflection on President Mandela's inaugural address from a social justice perspective". He argued that this inaugural address in 1994 was the most important in the country's history. He also discussed core moral principles – human dignity, basic rights and fundamental freedom - that social justice represents, and argued that Nelson Mandela had:

> "… used social justice as the key moral tool for building a new South Africa – not only in terms of our freedom, dignity and human rights, but also with regards to reconciliation and transformation" (Britz, 2021, p. 27).

Missing in that argument is that social injustice in South Africa was deeply rooted in the country's longer history of colonial injustice, and entrenched in the policy of apartheid to deepen political and economic injustice. The *Department of Agriculture, Land Reform*

and Rural Development is, for example, still addressing the colonial injustice of land dispossession through the *Native Lands Act* in 1913. It had led to poverty among South Africa's indigenous people. It also entrenched racial segregation that had lasting social and economic effects (Media statement, 2024). Government legislation had compelled all to comply, whether fair or unfair. Some scholars have argued that apartheid itself was '*colonialism of a special type*', in which the oppressed people and their oppressors occupied the same territory (African National Congress, 1980).

Racial policy and legislation enacted in the country's apartheid era (1948-1994) had in effect entrenched the already-unequal library and information services during the Dutch (1652-1795), British (1795-1910), Union (1910-1961) and Republic (1961-1994) periods. Reaction to these acts of political and economic injustice included social justice initiatives that steadily galvanised resistance. They included informal efforts and organised campaigns for equality of library and information access, as well as other strategies (Dick, 2012; 2020). Undoing this shameful legacy of library and information injustice for a 'new' Republic of South Africa requires comprehensive and sustained engagements with social justice themes and programmes. Their aims should emphasise equality of opportunities, and their strategies should set right past and present LIS injustices.

Objectives

The objectives of this essay are:

- to review early and recent sources dealing with social justice and LIS in South Africa;
- to discuss case studies of *decolonisation and whistleblowing* as examples to understand social justice (for community engagement) in LIS; and
- to share experiences of investigating, teaching and producing relevant literature and scholarly communication on social justice themes in the LIS curriculum.

Literature review

The literature of social justice traverses several academic disciplines. It also adapts over time, and across countries. In their argument for 'inclusion as social justice' in South African education, the researchers Ellison Musara, Carolyn Grant and Jo-Anne Vorster (2021) drew on American Nancy Fraser's earlier work. She had explained that whereas social justice discourse had focused initially on distribution, it subsequently emphasised "claims for redistribution on the one hand, and claims for recognition on the other" (Fraser, 1996, p.4). That approach urged both care and caution when applying concepts like 'social justice' across time and place. Musara, Grant and Vorster (2021, p.1) subsequently explain that "the meaning of inclusion and social justice is still widely contested despite the seeming global acceptance of these educational reforms in most nations".

Importantly, South Africa's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (1995-2002) had represented *restorative* rather than *retributive* justice to facilitate political change (McLeod, 2015). That approach had required the "inclusion of the community in restorative justice processes", and it persists today as one method of dealing with vigilantism in South Africa (Mokomane, 2023, p. 807). *Inclusion* features prominently too in the restorative justice approach to education in South Africa (Reyneke, 2011, p. 152). In that way it impacts higher education, and subsequently affects LIS education and research.

The literature of LIS is its body of research and investigative writings (e.g. books, chapters, journal articles) created, evaluated, published, reviewed, preserved, and distributed to researchers, librarians, and the wider LIS community. *Scholarly Communication* connects with this corpus of output through an extensive range of other writings that, *inter alia*, include conference papers, pre-prints, working papers, reports, blogs, discussion forums, as well as web-based materials. In that way, librarians and information professionals join LIS and other scholars in a fuller approach to research engagement, and they use several communication and publication streams. Globally, over the past decade, the volume of LIS literature and *scholarly communication* on social justice expanded rapidly as an important concept in the discipline (Mehra, Rioux & Albright, 2017).

In a review of the documentation of social justice literature, Winberry and Bishop (2021, p. 7) acknowledge the early Britz and Blignaut article. They also explain that a regular appearance of social justice in the literature emerged after 2000, and that its initial focus was the information behaviour of marginalised populations. Their analysis reveals how social justice-oriented themes, albeit expressed in other terms, appeared in LIS publications as far back as 1978. In a more direct formulation, it claims a 322% increase from the 2012-2013 to the 2014-2015 periods. Despite a trailing-off in the 2018-2019 period, social justice continued as "a topic of increased interest" in LIS to "address the information needs of those who are marginalised" (Winberry & Bishop, 2021, p.8).

Although the volume of literature on social justice has expanded globally, its quality and local impact remains uneven. As a result, the findings and recommendations are less helpful than the methodologies. Some research projects involving social justice and scholarly communication have targeted specific functions as well as sections of libraries. An example is a project of the Collections Directorate of the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT) Libraries in the United States of America. Its aim was to manifest diversity, inclusion, and social justice values in the daily work of its libraries. Eight staff members from the archives, technical services, preservation, scholarly communication, and the collections

strategy sections had constituted a *Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice (DISJ) Task Force* to answer the question:

> How can we operationalize the values of diversity, inclusion, and social justice in our policies, routines, and processes?

A subsequent article by a *Task Force* member discusses the project in greater detail. The author (Baildon, 2018) reflects on possible implications from anti-racist and anti-colonial positions, based on the *Task Force*'s report. Although it had embraced the *Open Access* (OA) movement as social justice work, its limitations and concerns were noted too. Participation and equitable global exchange, for example, were regarded just as important as access. The goal, Baildon argued (2018, p.177), should not be "a one-way bestowal of knowledge from the *Global North* (North America and Europe) to the *Global South*". Neither should it be about the *Global North*'s consumption of *Global South* scholarship as 'data', but constitute instead a genuine academic conversation.

In that way, as Baildon (2018, p.177) and Hathcock (2016) argue, it avoids a type of "colonialism of scholarly communication" that pressurises "*Global South* researchers to cite North American and European rather than local scholars", and "to publish in high-profile Western journals". At the same time, research in the *Global South* that investigates topics of regional or local relevance remains undervalued and overlooked. As either geographical or strategic concepts the "*Global South*" and "*Global North*", coined by the American left-wing political activist Carl Oglesby in 1969, may nonetheless be neither accurate, nor helpful. Critical questions should include: who decides which countries belong where?; and, how does this division implicate and/or impact social justice? In an analysis of a global division into "economic worlds", the 'new' South Africa had for example been regarded in Africa as an economically developed society, and a member of the *Global North* (Odeh, 2010).

It had focused on factors such as 'levels of productivity', gross national product, agricultural production, and exports. But an important event that sought to deal with both the country's politically and economically unjust past cannot be overlooked. Between 1995 and 2002 a *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* had worked to uncover the truth about severe human rights violations from March 1960 to May 1994. It sought reconciliation through restorative justice that connects with social justice "to address systemic inequalities, redistribute power and foster healing through participation within communities" (*Restorative Justice*, n.d.). Restorative justice is seen as a feasible pathway to social justice. Both are concerned with challenging and reshaping power structures to "foster healing through participation within communities" (*Restorative Justice*, n.d.).

Recognising the historical disparities that continue to skew South Africa's library and information services, a recent source also emphasises inclusivity. The authors (Bangani & Dube, 2023) connect social justice with *ubuntu* as being broadly about humanity to others, and as integral to community engagement. And a social justice initiative to decolonise the country's LIS "publishing landscape" enables "the inclusion of African researchers and research output into mainstream research processes" (Raju et al., 2015, p. 58; Raju et al., 2020). That is laudable as long as inclusion is merited, and/or based on a record of participation. It is important because arguments that critique 'colonial privilege' and 'Global South/Global North' concepts in order to 'problematise' scholarly communications and social justice are not always unproblematic themselves.

It is convenient but unhelpful, for example, to charge capitalism and the complicity of scholarly research for producing or reproducing "social inequalities that academic universities have perpetuated across the globe" (Roh, Inefeku & Drabinski, 2020, p. 50). Technological advances too have re-shaped the production of academic publications, and contributed to economic injustice in research globally. Many professional indexers, for example, now use indexing software which is a financial investment that should be recovered. An experienced South African indexer (P. Coates, personal communication, July 4, 2024) explains that the new software reduces several days of labour to a much shorter period. In that way, it could (and does) reduce the indexer's remuneration too. There is therefore the need for further and fuller investigation of the several ways in which social justice impacts LIS goals, functions and services.

Methodology and findings

Social justice is not the same everywhere. This essay applies a conceptual research methodology to analyse and evaluate ideas implicating social justice in two case studies of South Africa's LIS history. The first discusses perspectives and practices of *decolonisation* implicating the *Merensky Library* collections at the University of Pretoria in the 'old' South Africa. The second uncovers challenges faced by a 'whistleblower for information justice' in the 'new' South Africa. Taken together, the case studies reveal social justice features and challenges of *decolonisation* and *whistleblowing*, and they offer lessons for LIS researchers. An important finding of the first case study is that decolonisation emerged in South African LIS not as an impartial and inclusive process. That had led to a publicly-funded framework skewed by unequal access based on a repugnant racial classification. The second case study found that, despite racial equality in a 'new' and democratic South Africa, social injustice as information injustice necessitates vigilance.

Discussion

Investigating and documenting local examples and the lessons of social justice require hard work and patience. The results are however original and authentic, and best for teaching and publication, as well as for presentation at conferences, symposia and seminars. Their addition to the LIS curriculum brings opportunities too for class discussion that could lead to fuller inquiry and wider interest.

Social justice connects, for example, with *decolonisation* to overturn oppressive hierarchies and power structures in communities and countries. Investigation of local cases shapes appropriate reaction to implement redress, and to produce relevant material for teaching in local as well as regional contexts. In an analysis of *decolonisation* in Namibia and South Africa, for example, Christopher Saunders (2017) emphasises their complexity. He argues for the importance of seeing them as individual cases in a regional and comparative perspective. Not only should South Africa's *decolonisation* be understood as one of a 'special type', but its origins can be traced to different points in time. By the 1980s there was even a view that "South Africa was still to be decolonized" (Saunders, 2017, p. 106). The 'republican' idea had however challenged British colonialism in South Africa already since about 1835.

Of the two streams of Afrikaner migrants that left the Cape Colony in a *Great Trek*, the *Voortrekkers* (pioneers) listed political reasons. *Trekboer* parties, on the other hand, left primarily for better pasture (Giliomee et al., 2022, p. 154). This *Great Trek* into the interior had led to the establishment of Afrikaner republics. It displaced the *Ndebele* people who themselves then trekked to Matabeleland in Zimbabwe, and it contributed to the collapse of the Zulu Kingdom. Even when they lost their republics at the end of the South African War in 1902, it would remain a priority for Afrikaners until the formation of the Republic of South Africa in 1961. The *Volksraad* (Peoples Council) of the independent and anti-colonial *Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek* (or old Transvaal Republic) had in 1889 already, and as another priority, proposed the establishment of a university.

That would become a reality in 1908 as the *Transvaal University College* (*Tuks*), and on 15 April 1938 the original *Merensky Library*, now an important heritage site, opened its doors as a separate building. Some would argue that the *University of Pretoria* and its *Merensky Library* were conceived with '*decolonisation* in their DNA'. Others would later insist that it was instead 'colonialism of a special type'. The *South African Communist Party*, for example, explained in 1962 that this 'colonialism of a special type' had originated when South Africa became a Union in 1910. As a new or 'special type' of colonialism, it had replaced British colonialism. In effect, 'Black' South Africa had become the colony of 'White' South Africa.

With its election victory in 1948 the *National Party* then 'weaponised' this colonialism of a 'special type' through its many acts, laws, and regulations during the apartheid era. As a consequence of these events, the *University of Pretoria* and its library benefited from an unequal allocation of resources. In 1976, during its 'Expansion Years', a new library (*Merensky 2*) opened its doors. The University librarian, Petrus Carolus Coetzee, had already started training library staff members in 1938. He became too the first Head of the university's *Department of Library Science* when it was established in 1948. His reputation was tainted however through connection with the Belgian *Nazi* collaborator, Herman J. de Vleeschauwer. Coetzee had recruited him to the library in 1950, but De Vleeschauwer soon moved to the *University of South Africa*.

On retirement, de Vleeschauwer donated much of his personal library collection to the *University of Johannesburg* (then named as *Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit*). That 'special' collection had included books stolen from Jewish homes in Belgium during *World War Two*. Their owners had been deported to *Nazi* concentration camps, and their homes looted by special units that included one for private book collections. De Vleeschauwer's 'special' collection blemished the reputations of both the *University of Johannesburg* and the *University of Pretoria*, as well as their libraries. It was in effect a case of 'decolonisation as a special type of corruption', as well as one of social injustice.

A bust honouring Coetzee has since been removed from display in the University of Pretoria library, revealing a sad and troubled past. The lesson we may take from this is to question whether and/or how ideas of *decolonisation* and/or *Africanisation* can or will bring social justice, and how that would be different from *Afrikanerisation* during the apartheid period. Should social justice in South Africa's university, public and other types of libraries, for example, mean 'decolonising' their collections? And what would that mean in practical terms? Nelson Mandela's example, during imprisonment on *Robben Island*, is instructive.

When the anti-communist prisoners were stealing the communist books from the prison library and the communist prisoners were stealing its anti-communist books, Nelson instead borrowed and read D.J. Opperman's *Junior Verseboek* and *Senior Verseboek*. He then wrote to Danie van Niekerk at *Tafelberg Publishers* in Cape Town, and ordered these titles. He included a postal order in the envelope to cover the costs. Danie wrote back, and sent both requested books. He also added the *Groot Verseboek*, and returned the postal order. A few lines from Nelson's subsequent thank-you letter in Afrikaans to Danie is worth quoting:

> "D.J. Opperman se bloemlesings is van besondere waarde, en ek waardeer hulle meer as wat ek in woorde kan stel. Die Groot Verseboek bevat 'n omvattende aantal uiteenlopende gedigte van 'n substantiele deursnee van

> ons volk…. Miskien sal ek eendag die geleentheid kry om my dankbaarheid aan u te betuig" (Poetry and 'taal' in letter, 2013).

Danie's daughter, Elmarie Rautenbach, subsequently posted this letter on her *Facebook* page and added the following: "The thought that there was this link between one of our greatest leaders and the language we speak, is special" (*Poetry and 'taal' in letter*, 2013). Decolonisation could therefore be more about adding than erasing, more about sharing around than tearing down. We should ask questions and challenge ideas like those of Congolese philosopher and writer, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (2021, p. 131-33).

He describes the *Colonial Library* as one whose collections inform pessimistic views about Africa. Questions should include the following:

- How do we get past the predicament of using this *Colonial Library*'s collections to produce the kind of 'Africanist knowledge' required to challenge that pessimism?
- Is there in fact a *Colonial Library* at all?, and
- What really is *Africanist knowledge*?

After leaving the University of Cape Town over a curriculum clash about a course on Africa, Indian-born Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani returned in 2017. In an address about decolonising the post-colonial university, he elaborated Kenyan writer Ali Mazrui's idea that universities (and one could add their library collections) "should permit maximum interplay between different interpretations of reality" (Omar, 2017). For these African scholars, language and their literatures are central to representing different interpretations of reality. Mamdani explains that how the Afrikaans language and its literature developed is the most decolonising initiative on the African continent.

That was the result, he argued, of the support from vast institutional networks that included universities, newspapers, magazines and publishers (and one should add libraries) – all sourced through public funds. Mamdani then encouraged the creation of centres for studying African languages and literatures, and of translation units to produce the best global, African, and South African literatures in these languages.What we learn from Mandela, Mazrui, Mamdani and others is to avoid narrowly-focused interpretations of *Afrikanerisation*, *Africanisation*, and *decolonisation*. We should instead nurture approaches that are inclusive and holistic, to advance and secure social justice in library and information services.

At the same time, we should be vigilant and resolute in guarding the integrity of information, and securing the right of access to information. When Athol Williams (2021) uncovered the corrupt strategies of his employer, the global management consultancy firm *Bain &*

Company, he learned more about information for *restorative justice* and for social justice. For him, both aim to challenge power imbalances, rectify harm, and promote inclusivity and fairness. Information for *restorative memory* and for *restorative justice* however has a more direct practical side to which he committed himself. In October 2019, Athol 'informed on' or 'blew the whistle' on *Bain & Company*.

He has qualifications in engineering, management and politics, and is also an award-winning poet. *Bain & Company* had contracted Athol to help mend relations with the South African government after a *Commission of inquiry into Tax Administration and Governance at SARS* (South African Revenue Service) found in 2018 that it had been involved in state capture. State capture involves political corruption in which private interests influence decision-making processes to their own advantage. There was a "deep collusion" between *Bain & Company* and the *SARS* Commissioner.

As a result, several government departments failed to effectively deliver essential law enforcement, security, transport, electricity, and information services to South Africans (Williams, 2021, p. 9). Athol had worked for the company before and believed that his "good standing" was the reason why this task was assigned to him. His understanding was that *Bain* was committed to bring remedy for harms it had caused. By 2009 South Africa was experiencing a take-over by corrupt politicians and officials that *Bain* began to exploit. That occurred as a joint effort to repurpose some of the country's public institutions and to redirect public resources.

The *South African Revenue Service* (*SARS*) was a key institution that *Bain* targeted, which led to a tax shortfall estimated at R100 billion. The country's President (Williams, 2021, p. 211) reported that the overall cost of state capture was between R500 billion and R1 trillion. Frustrated by his efforts with *Bain & Company* and its legal team *Baker McKenzie*, to obtain information from official reports and documents, Athol reported this company in October 2019 to the *Zondo Commission* for withholding information about its complicity in state capture. This was a *Judicial Commission into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in South Africa's Public Sector, including its Organs of State.*

Without that information, Athol could not fulfil the task assigned to him, and he was unable in good conscience to report to the Commission, and to South Africans, that the company had made amends for damaging *SARS* as well as other public institutions. Athol realised that *Bain & Company* had never intended to make full disclosure because it feared a more comprehensive investigation and possible prosecution by the United States' *Department of Justice*. The *Zondo Commission* subsequently uncovered collusion between *Bain & Company*, as well as its South African branch, with the former President of South Africa

and its Revenue Service chief executive officer, to "capture" the tax agency (Williams, 2021, p. 195).

In that way, *SARS* and other state institutions were damaged when public funds were siphoned off into private pockets. Athol's connection with *Bain & Company* is a dark and unfinished chapter in South Africa's information history as a "new" democracy. The South African and the United Kingdom governments banned the company for ten years in August 2022 (Kollewe, 2022; Reuters 2022). More worrying was that Athol fled the country, and remained in hiding without income or guarantees for his safety. In an act of social justice, he had chosen to stand up and speak out against corruption, and to oppose powerful forces. Whereas apartheid informants had been "lackeys of the powerful", whistleblowers in the "new" South Africa "place limits on the abuse of power, by power holders" to secure social justice (Uys, 2011, p. 165).

Athol discovered that *Bain & Company* had revealed to him only the information it wanted to reveal instead of the information he needed for the task assigned to him. He named this as *Baintruth* that only reveals information if and when asked, and of invoking legal privilege in order not to disclose information. Also, the company had labelled information to protect corrupt interests. In that way, '*commercially confidential*' and '*non-public*' became labels to hide information about tampering with tender processes at South Africa's telecommunications company, *Telkom* (Williams, 2021, p. 223). This *Baintruth* was not the truth to which Athol had committed himself, and *Bain information* was instead about showing 'mistakes' that it had made. In other words, that it had not done anything morally wrong or caused any injustice.

Athol explains that it was in fact *Bain-disinformation* instead of *Bain-misinformation*. In doing so, he assumed the role of an 'information hero' for social justice, standing up to a 'global information bully'. In 2022 he was presented with the *Blueprint Special Recognition* award for "integrity and bravery in the public interest". It noted that he had "highlighted the vast gap between theories and ideas of social justice and their realisation". In his acknowledgement of the award Athol, who is now also an Honorary Fellow at the University of Oxford, affirmed its encouragement to continue advocating for justice (Williams, 2023).

The commendation to that high honour as an ethics scholar mentions his dedication to fighting social and economic injustice. Importantly, it recognises also the initiation of the *Read to Rise* (2013) charity that he and his wife had founded to provide educational opportunities for children. It is active at primary schools in the Mitchells Plain township in Cape Town, where he grew up, as well as Soweto township in Johannesburg. Athol's private library of books that he collected since the 1990s reached over 2,000 by 1995.

Among other interests, it features South African literature and history collections as well as world literature.

Taken together, the library, literacy, and reading projects with his wife and relatives, covering just over a decade, reveals a strong commitment to close the vast gap between theories of social justice and their realisation. Athol's story underscores the need to be vigilant and resolute about information integrity, and about the right of access to information. He joins other African 'information heroes' who before him also stood up to secure information and social justice in difficult and dangerous times.

At great personal risk in 2012, Abdel Kader Haidara, the Malian librarian and archivist, had spearheaded a clandestine operation to move thousands of ancient manuscripts to safe houses in *Timbuktu* (Hammer, 2014). In that way, he prevented militant extremists from destroying the precious writings. Sarah Cody (n.d.) explains that "when it comes to preservation, social justice involves making a personal as well as professional commitment to fighting against systems of inequity". Information heroes were instrumental in saving African antiquities, and preserving the continent's cultural heritage (Dick, 2014). Librarians and archivists were inevitably involved too in the *anti-apartheid struggle*. Some became information villains, while others are revered as information heroes.

We need more social justice and information justice heroes today. We should feature and foreground them in our curricula, our literature, and our conferences. They merit inclusion on an honour roll of '*information heroes for social justice*'.

Conclusion and recommendations

This essay:

- Reviewed some of the LIS literature on social justice;
- Discussed case studies of decolonisation and whistleblowing as examples to understand aspects of social justice in LIS; and
- Shared experiences of investigating, and writing about social justice.

Even if social justice is understood as re-cycling old responses to fresh challenges, its relevance cannot be ignored. Social justice compels LIS teachers, researchers and practitioners to re-assess present circumstances, and to revise responses to a new information environment. Time and place are however fundamental factors for appropriate responses and should be acknowledged in discussion, debate, and recommendation. If international conferences are helpful in recognising and labelling wider shifts and trends, regional and local conferences are helpful for relevant and meaningful content.

The *SCECSAL* (Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Library and Information Associations) proceedings, reports, resolutions, and related publications generally tend toward practical advice and implementable recommendations. These should be more accessible to the wider library community for discussion and action. Social justice themes and topics should feature prominently too in LIS curricula for both instruction and further investigation. A higher aim should be to encourage social justice investigation at the Masters and Doctoral degree levels, as well as publication and reviews of their findings in thematic issues of internationally accredited journals, or as fuller monographs. Ensuring and securing social justice in our curricula, our research, our practices and services require that we continue to investigate, document, teach and publish about its themes and its significance.

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