

**‘If RLUK academic librarians agree that digital strategies are in need of a (critical) decolonising process, powerful institutional change can occur, despite the intersection of education and technology with unethical values.’ – A Critical Discourse**

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# Contents Page

List of abbreviations.....	Page 5
ABSTRACT.....	Page 6
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	Page 7
Digital Inequality: The Need For More Critical Conversations and Critical Approaches.....	Page 7
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	Page 14
Digital Divide/Digital Inequality.....	Page 14
Digital Policies of UK Academic Libraries.....	Page 21
The links between Technology and Inequity.....	Page 25
Critical Librarianship and Decolonisation in Academic Libraries .....	Page 28
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	Page 31
Critical Race Theory .....	Page 31
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODS.....	Page 35
Qualitative Methodology.....	Page 35
Research Method: Individual Interviews.....	Page 36
Interview Questions.....	Page 36
Sample.....	Page 37
Recruitment.....	Page 37
Data Analysis.....	Page 40
Overcoming Limitations.....	Page 41
CHAPTER FIVE: KEY FINDINGS.....	Page 42
Definitions and Criticality .....	Page 42
Definitions .....	Page 43
Criticality .....	Page 48
How Critical Change can be Achieved within a neo-liberal Structure like the university .....	Page 52
Barriers to Critical Change within a neo-liberal structure like the university .....	Page 55
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION.....	Page 60
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	Page 68
List of Further Recommendations.....	Page 72
Recommendations for UK Academic Libraries .....	Page 72
Recommendations for further research on this topic .....	Page 73

REFERENCE AND BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... Page 75

APPENDIX ..... Page 82

Interview Questions..... Page 82

Example of Participant Transcript ..... Page 82

## **List of abbreviations**

ALA: American Library Association

BAME: Black and Minority Ethnic

BIPOC: Black, Ingenious and People of Colour

UCL: University College London

EDI: Equality Diversity and Inclusion (although please note some librarians use 'Equity, Diversity and inclusion

LIS: Library and Information Sector

RLUK: Research Libraries United Kingdom

CRT: Critical Race Theory

JISC: Joint Information Systems Committee

## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation is formally supported and recognised by RLUK consortium as a response to their strategic aims of developing an equitable digital shift and combatting digital inequality. I argue that RLUK academic librarians need to view digital strategies as a (critical) decolonising process and review their conceptualisations of ‘Digital Inequality; in order to achieve these goals.

My argument is underpinned by CRT, but also carries elements from a of critical social theoretical frameworks and methodologies such as Critical Librarianship, Critical Race Theory, Critical Development Study, International Development Theory, (Black) Digital Studies, (Black) Marxism and Foucauldian Discourse. These theories deeply examine systems of ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Power’. I interviewed RLUK Librarians and evaluated both their personal and institutional definitions of ‘Digital Inequality’ and their general Critical Awareness of related issues on this topic. Asking ourselves difficult questions about what we understand and believe about ourselves and society can start the process of the radical institutional change needed to deliver RLUK’s vision.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **Digital Inequality: The Need For More Critical Conversations and Critical Approaches**

Even though the creation of an unequal data-driven society with an everyday reliance on technology was in existence long before the COVID-19 pandemic, the experience of lockdown brought global recognition, especially amongst academic libraries, that many of their students (and staff) faced forms digital *exclusions*<sup>1</sup>. For the purpose of a collective understanding, I will use the term ‘digital inequality’, even though Academic Libraries use various terms for digital exclusion such as ‘digital poverty’, ‘digital marginalisation’ and the ‘digital divide’<sup>2</sup>. For Academic libraries, digital inequality is popularly defined as a lack of suitable devices, internet connection or digital skills which caused digital exclusion.<sup>3</sup>

In 2020 Research Libraries UK (RLUK) launched their Manifesto to try to “combat digital poverty” and to ensure “an equitable digital shift”<sup>4</sup>. Whilst their intention is undoubtedly genuine, there is a philosophical issue that is never addressed in any academic library policy. Can any form of digital inequity and inequality be achieved within a Capitalist society that systematically and structurally favours Global North Whiteness, Cisgender Hetero-Normativity, Able-bodied Hetero-Patriarchy?<sup>5</sup> Similarly, can Digital Equity be truly achieved within the structures of the commercial neoliberal University which RLUK libraries have to work in?<sup>6</sup> To quote Audre Lorde “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Appleton, L. (2021). Accelerating the digital shift: how a global pandemic has created an environment for rapid change in academic libraries, *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 27:3, 257-258, DOI: [10.1080/13614533.2021.1994184](https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2021.1994184)

<sup>2</sup> RLUK (no date). ‘*Digital Shift Case Studies*’. Available: <https://www.rluk.ac.uk/digital-shift-case-studies-2/> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2022]

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> RLUK. (no date). *Digital Shift*. Available :<https://www.rluk.ac.uk/digital-shift-manifesto/> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> august 2022]

<sup>5</sup> Rosinski, C. (2021). "Disrupting Cis/Heteronormativity and Interrogating Whiteness: The Advancement of Counselling Through Critical Sex Education" *Counselling and Psychology Dissertations*. [https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/counseling\\_dissertations/9](https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/counseling_dissertations/9)

<sup>6</sup> Clark, I (2018). ‘*Tackling Whiteness In The Academy*’, Available: <https://ijclark.medium.com/tackling-whiteness-in-the-academy-f3b3c451936a> [accessed 15th July 2022]

<sup>7</sup> Lorde, A. (2018). *The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house / Audre Lorde*. London], UK: Penguin Classics.

I started my research with this question in mind, which is why, what followed naturally was an awareness that any research study that seeks to achieve forms of social justice needs to be a decolonial framed one. As Jairo I. Funez, PhD. tweeted: “Decolonial theories do not change the world directly or automatically, but they do have the power to speak back to colonial, patriarchal and capitalist structures. They have the power to imagine another world against a seemingly unchangeable reality”.<sup>8</sup>

When it comes to creating meaningful change within the digital space, using a critical, decolonial lens is especially needed. My study primarily uses Critical Race Theory but is also informed by Critical Librarianships, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Black Digital Studies. These critical theories deeply examine systems of ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Power’ and reveal problematic foundational ontological, teleological and epistemological assumptions embedded within Technology which need to be *critically* acknowledged before real change can even commence’<sup>9</sup>.

For example, how can RLUK librarians create an equitable digital shift when Development Theory shows that the Western technological shift has never been equitable in the first place?<sup>10</sup> There has always been a techno-determinism view of Technology which has been influenced by capitalism.<sup>11</sup> The implicit message embedded in Technological Discourse sees Technology as the ‘only’ symbol of civilizational superiority and universal solution<sup>12</sup>. This techno-

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<sup>8</sup> Flores Funez, J. (2022) [https://twitter.com/Jairo\\_I\\_Funez/status/1528025580184166401?s=20&t=yPPy9501UQPODkSwyvc-4w](https://twitter.com/Jairo_I_Funez/status/1528025580184166401?s=20&t=yPPy9501UQPODkSwyvc-4w) [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2022]

<sup>9</sup> Powers, P. (2007) The Philosophical Foundations of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis. *CADAAD journal*. 1 (2), 18–34. Available: <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/journals/cadaad/> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>10</sup> Hudson, D. (2012). ‘Unpacking ‘information inequality’: toward a critical discourse of global justice in library and information science. *Canadian journal of information and library science*. 36 (3-4), 69–70 ; Available: <https://web-p-ebSCOhost-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=f4f7514c-500e-4d19-82a3-601567f872ed%40redis> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

Hudson D & Lowrey K (2016) ‘On Dark Continents and Digital Divides: Information Inequality and the Reproduction of Racial Otherness in Library and Information Studies/Response to Hudson. *Journal of information ethics*. 25 (1), 62. Available: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1806969429?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Hudson, D. (2012). ‘Unpacking ‘information inequality’, *op.cit*



deterministic message has been defined and spread by a Western hegemonic community who holds the most power and privilege<sup>13</sup>. Consequently, in order to advance in Western society, marginalised and minoritised communities have no option other than to use this type of technology which has been forced upon them.<sup>14</sup> Technology discourse has also traditionally ignored the technology and knowledge from the culture of marginalised communities and so has ignored cognitive justice (the recognition of the plurality of knowledge and expressing the right of different forms of knowledge to co-exist).<sup>15</sup> As Reisdorf and Rhinesmith correctly state, “[there is a] focus on bringing ‘technology, resources and knowledge’ [into communities] from the outside as a starting point, rather than tapping into the knowledge and strength that already exists”.<sup>16</sup>

Such a deep, critical analysis reinforces this dissertation’s first argument that if digital policies become *critical* decolonial policies, then this is more likely to promote greater forms of digital equity and equality for marginalised and minoritised communities. I define ‘critical’ decolonial process as different from common decolonisation attempts happening within academic library settings which merely seek to improve the diversity of staff and collections.<sup>17</sup> In alignment with Critical Librarianship arguments, I too argue that this type of work often only offers superficial and performative ‘equity achievement’. To be included in a space is not necessarily the same as having agency within that space because Racism is far more complex and multifaceted than that.<sup>18</sup> A deeper critical decolonial approach would necessitate challenging inequitable

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Reisdorf C, Rhinesmith C, (2018). ‘An Asset-based Approach to Digital Inclusion Research in the US Context’ in *Digital Inclusion: An International Comparative Analysis*, (London: Lexington Books) pp. 39-55

<sup>17</sup> Leung Y. S. & McKnight López R. J (eds.). (2021). *Knowledge justice : disrupting library and information studies through critical race theory*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press ; Hudson, D. (2012). ‘Unpacking ‘information inequality’ *op.cit*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

structures in much more critical ways and therefore new digital approaches and strategies which are more meaningful.

The second argument advanced in this dissertation is that concepts such as ‘Digital Inequality’ need to be re-conceptualised by RLUK librarians as meaning more than just a lack of access to devices, skills or internet. As mentioned, our field uses many terms such as ‘digital inequality’, ‘digital inequity’, ‘digital poverty’, ‘digital marginalisation’, ‘digital exclusion’ without much justification for why these terms were picked. My forwarding for a change in definition is based on evidence I present in my Literature Review (Chapter 2) of how current concepts of Digital Inequality are too narrow, outdated and erase the multifaceted ways in which digital inequalities are reinforced by existing structural inequalities. My Literature Review conveys the amount of work that has been done which reveals how algorithms on the internet and in library systems reflect biases; how surveillance technology, A.I technology, games, social media have also been shown to both cause and/or reflect digital inequalities or poverties. Access to laptops is clearly just one aspect of digital inequality that libraries are concentrating on. My dissertation is a call for our sector to stop ignoring these other digital inequality issues.

These two central arguments of: calling for a broader definition of digital inequality and a critical decolonial policy which examines how different forms of structural and personal power and privilege contribute to digital inequality, is needed if RLUK are serious about delivering their vision to combat digital inequity issues.

Of course, I recognise that systematic, structural change does not come overnight and is not completely within the control of RLUK. However, by having more critical conversations about this subject with RLUK colleagues, greater critical awareness can be achieved which can lead

to ‘small’ but powerful changes in everyday practice. This is why my research methods consist of interviewing RLUK librarians. As I explain in Chapter 4 , my questions were purposely designed to be in line with Critical Theories’ general emphasis of interrogating, critiquing, and questioning hegemonic epistemologies.

Yet, to ‘interrogate’ is often associated with aggression and force. Learning that my research positionality is that of a young, Black, female Library and information professional and postgraduate student could unfortunately encourage this view. Harvard research confirms that black women have historically and socio-culturally been viewed by wider society, as more likely to have belligerent, contentious, and angry personalities<sup>19</sup> Whilst I am aware that as a light-skinned black woman I have ‘light skin privilege’, owing to colourism bias, my research was still complicated by my race positionality<sup>20</sup>. This is discussed further in my Methods chapter (Chapter 4).

The fact that the premise of this dissertation derives from a Critical Librarianship, Black Digital Humanities and Critical Race viewpoints and, consequently, does not ‘assume’ that Librarians, Policy Design or Technology are ‘neutral’ may also be seen as contentious and may provoke an initial negative reaction<sup>21</sup>. Discussing social issues such as the interconnectedness of Race and Power with digital inequality could easily make people feel uncomfortable. There may be disbelief or denial that inequity is embedded within libraries as a result of ‘Vocational Awe’ “Vocational awe describes the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently

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<sup>19</sup> Motro D, Evans B J, Ellis A, B. Lehman (2022). ‘*The Angry Black Woman Stereotype at Work*’ Available: <https://hbr.org/2022/01/the-angry-black-woman-stereotype-at-work> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>20</sup> BBC (2019). ‘*Colourism: Dark-skinned and light-skinned - why there is no difference*’, Available : <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/47872368>. Accessed 15th June 2022

<sup>21</sup> Leung, S. Y. & López-McKnight, J. R. (2021). ‘Knowledge Justice, *op cit* ; Ettarh F (2018) Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves. *In the library with the lead pipe*. Available: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique”.<sup>22</sup> Defensive attitudes towards this study could be caused by White Fragility; defensive actions, feelings, and behaviours, such as anger, fear, and silence that protect white people from having to engage in difficult and uncomfortable conversations about Race and Power<sup>23</sup>. Discomfort may be particular directed with my dissertation’s theoretical framework of CRT, that see White supremacy as embedded within academic, library and digital structures.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, my Findings chapter (Chapter 5) confirms that some agree with my argument in theory but wonder how it can be put into practice. Reduced budgets, and the need for academic libraries policies to be aligned with their university’s central strategy can mean that some academic libraries may feel unable to broaden the digital inequality definition. In Chapter 6, I discuss these barriers in more detail.

Yet I believe Librarians do hold power and, in a hierarchal academic space, some more than others. All individuals can and should use their personal power where it exists. This was the main message at the Information Literacy Conference 2022<sup>25</sup>. CILIP President, Kate Robinson, said that: Any information professional “places ethics at the centre of their work” because “ethics is at the heart of our profession”<sup>26</sup>. It is both a professional and ethical responsibility to care about these issues. Commitment to *long term* and *ongoing* education about anti-racism and other forms of anti-hegemonic work in order to develop equitable forms of justice in all spheres is also outlined by the ALA.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ettarh F (2018) *ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Medical News Today (no date). ‘Everything you need to know about white fragility’. Available: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/white-fragility-definition>. [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>24</sup> Leung, S. Y. & López-McKnight, J. R. (2021). ‘Knowledge Justice’, op cit  
<sup>25</sup> <https://www.lilacconference.com/lilac-archive/lilac-2022-1#keynotespeakers>

<sup>26</sup> *Information Professional*. (2022). p.53

<sup>27</sup> ALA. (2022). ‘Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity: A Framework, Joint ALA/ARL Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Framework Task Force’, Available: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org/advocacy/files/content/diversity/ALA%20ARL%20Cultural%20Proficiencies%20for%20Racial%20Equity%20Framework.pdf> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2022]

Wealthy universities certainly have the resources and the pool of talent to create powerful civic change. “As sites of knowledge production, radical innovation and deep expertism, universities are the ideal location for radical transformation”.<sup>28</sup> Like RLUK, I am passionate about change and would like to imagine a future where there are equitable digital systems, and a “higher education system who uses technology for equity and social justice”.<sup>29</sup> I acknowledge and do not shy away from the fact that this would be a difficult journey for LIS. EDI work is not meant to feel easy and is much more than attending bias workshops which have proven to be short-lived.<sup>30</sup> It is a rigorous practice of asking ourselves difficult questions about what we understand and what we believe in, which is what my dissertation is seeking to expose.

My aim for this dissertation is to add to the “growing body of work [that] is moving beyond critique into actionable recommendations, which are outlined in my conclusions and recommendations chapter”<sup>31</sup> Being situated within a small body of scholarship that digresses from techno-deterministic narratives and discusses “intersectional explanations and solutions to inequality” will hopefully increase “truth telling, accountability, negotiation, redistribution and redress”, which is needed if real change is to be created in the digital sphere.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Czernowitz L. (2022). ‘Multi-layered digital inequalities in HEIs’, *Global University Network For Innovation*, Available: <https://www.guni-call4action.org/article/multi-layered-digital-inequalities-heis-paradox-post-digital-society> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>29</sup> *ibid* (p.1)

<sup>30</sup> Smith, N. ‘How Effective are Academic Libraries’ attempts at dismantling Racism’. Available: <https://www.earll.co.uk/post/how-effective-are-academic-libraries-attempts-at-dismantling-racism> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2022] ; Clark, I (2018). *op. cit* [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> July 2022]

<sup>31</sup> Adler, M. (2016). ‘The Case for Taxonomic Reparations’. *Knowledge Organisation* 43(8): 630-640. 53

<sup>32</sup> Helper E J (2021). *Digital disconnect, The Social Causes and Consequences of Digital Inequalities*, SAGE: London p.18 ; Adler. M. (2016). *op.cit.* p.53

## CHAPTER TWO : LITERATURE REVIEW

I have divided my literature review into four themes which I deem to be appropriate to my study. These include Digital Divide/Inequality, Digital Policies of UK Academic Libraries, the links between Technology and Racism, and Critical librarianship and Decolonisation in Academic Libraries

### 1. Digital Digital/ Digital Inequality

Reviewing literature about the digital inequality reveals that discussions, research and scholarly perspectives about digital inequality have undergone theoretical shifts throughout the years. For instance, between 1995-2003, researchers focussed on ‘first level divides’.<sup>33</sup> This focussed on a lack of physical access.<sup>34</sup> Digital Inequality was commonly called the ‘Digital Divide’ and defined digital inequality as “the divide between those with access to new technologies and those without”.<sup>35</sup>

For librarians such as myself whose theoretical understanding of digital inequality has matured, the conceptual limitations of writing during this period are very apparent. For example, Kim et al provide a very unsatisfactory conceptual theorisation and discussion of the ‘Digital Divide’.<sup>36</sup> For Kim, the Digital Divide can be categorised as: “access to information devices and information (media accessibility); the ability to utilize information resources

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<sup>33</sup> Hamilton, A. M. (2020). A Genealogy of Critical Race and Digital Studies: Past, Present, and Future. *Sociology of race and ethnicity* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.) 6 (3), 292–301 Available: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2332649220922577> [Accessed 15th July 2022]

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> Kim, M.-C. & Kim, J.-K. (2001). ‘Digital Divide: Conceptual Discussions and Prospect’, in *Lecture notes in computer science*. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg. pp. 78–91. Kim, M.-C. & Kim, J.-K. (2001). Available: [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/3-540-47749-7\\_6](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/3-540-47749-7_6). [Accessed 15th June 2022]

(information mobilization); and the eagerness to use information devices and information resource”.<sup>37</sup> However, such an argument problematically conflates ‘Digital Poverty’ with ‘Information Poverty’ and therefore reproduces biased epistemological thought that is found in the latter field. I acknowledge that ‘Digital Divides’ research has emerged from the longer tradition of scholarship of information divides (information poverty) which has been around since 1960.<sup>38</sup> Yet, applying principles of ‘Information Poverty’ to ‘Digital Poverty’ can replicate the conceptual limitations of making assumptions about the “information poor” and characterising distinct groups of individuals by their ‘lack of information’. This is controversial, especially when assumptions are made from the privileged lens of white, middle-class librarianship.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, within the field of Information Poverty, there is often a focus on the behaviour of the individual experiencing poverty, rather than the institution creating poverty and the “systematic, interactive, socio-technical needs” that can “push and hold certain groups of people’ within information marginalisation’.<sup>40</sup> This lack of critical awareness about the limitations, language and traditional assumptions of information inequality is also extensively written about by D. Hudson.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p.81

<sup>38</sup> Yu, L. (2006). ‘Understanding information inequality: Making sense of the literature of the information and digital divides’. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 38(4), 229- 252. Available: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0961000606070600> . [Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2022]

<sup>39</sup> Haider, J. & Bawden, D. (2007). Conceptions of ‘information poverty’ in LIS: a discourse analysis. *Journal of documentation*. 63 (4), 534–557. Available: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241506098\\_Conceptions\\_of\\_information\\_poverty\\_in\\_LIS\\_A\\_discourse\\_analysis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241506098_Conceptions_of_information_poverty_in_LIS_A_discourse_analysis) [Accessed 15th June 2022]

<sup>40</sup> Gibson, A. N. & Martin, J. D. (2019.) Re-situating information poverty: Information marginalization and parents of individuals with disabilities. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*. 70 (5), 476–487. (p.2). Available: <https://asistdl.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/asi.24128> [Accessed 1st August 2022]

<sup>41</sup> Hudson, D. (2012). Unpacking ‘information inequality’: *op.cit*

In general, this early definition of digital inequality suffers from the weakness of creating an overly simplified dichotomy between ‘access and no access’. By focussing solely on access, it ignores the existence and causes of other ‘divides’ or ‘inequalities’.

It can be said that more sophisticated understandings of the digital divide(s) began to be seen within scholarship from 2004-2012, where discussions “moved beyond the parameter of physical access” towards considerations of computer usage and literacy, which were coined as ‘second level divides’.<sup>42</sup> Works written in this period by M. Warschauer and N. Selwyn highlight the limitations of a narrow definition that focusses on the ‘haves’ and have nots’.<sup>43</sup> These studies aim to transcend the simplistic notions from the period 1995 to 2003 by addressing how societal, economic cultural and political contexts and conditions can prevent different degrees of access to information technology amongst people.

Warschauer can be praised for beginning to embrace basic EDI values as he bases his findings on non-western countries (China, India, Brazil). Yet, Warschauer does not address his own positionality and how this can have ethical implication for all forms of research, especially ethnography and research done on non-western countries<sup>44</sup>. Culturally appropriate epistemologies and methodologies in research is needed, especially when studying indigenous communities, in order to reduce the ethical, cultural, political and personal issues which come from unequal power dynamics between the [white] researcher and the [non white] who are being researched.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Dijk, J. van. (2020). *The digital divide*, Cambridge, UK: Polity (p.9)

<sup>43</sup> Warschauer, M. (2004). *Technology and social inclusion : rethinking the digital divide*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press ; Selwyn N. (2004). Reconsidering Political and Popular Understandings of the Digital Divide. *New media & society*. 6 (3), 341–362. Available: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1461444804042519>. [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> July 2022]

<sup>44</sup> Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*



The fact that Waeschauer begins his book by stating that “a starting point for my research has been the concept of a digital divide, used by the U.S. National Telecommunications and Information Administration under the Clinton administration to refer to the gap between those who do and do not have access to computers and the Internet” creates ethical tensions.<sup>46</sup> Clearly, his concept of the digital divide derives from an Anglo-centric, global north perspective. This may have wrongly influenced his ethnographic pre-positions if the “cultural [western] logics” were used as measures of progress and “so any departure from or outright rejection of this teleology” were consequently viewed negatively.<sup>47</sup>

Such critical acknowledgment is also missed by Selwyn who argues that in order to understand the digital divide we must ask: “(1) what is meant by ICT; (2) what is meant by ‘access’; (3) what is the relationship between ‘access to ICT’ and ‘use of ICT’; and (4) how can we best consider the consequences of engagement with ICT” .<sup>48</sup> Like Waeschauer there is yet again a failure to critically acknowledge that such definitions are coming from western centric, “singular definitions” of meaning making.

Admittedly, Waeschauer does well to highlight to readers that “the personal computer and the Internet, for example, emerged in a particular U.S. social context, and consequently their designs reflect the values and perspectives of the American engineers who worked on them [which is why] “English and other Romanized languages got a head start on the Internet, a bias that strongly influenced who has been able to access the Internet, what materials are published there, and what broader social systems and structures are privileged”.<sup>49</sup> Rejecting technology as “the culturally neutral linchpin of universal solutions” underpins the argument of my

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<sup>46</sup> Warschauer, M. (2004), *op.cit*, p.1

<sup>47</sup> Hudson, D. (2012). Unpacking ‘information inequality’, *op.cit*, p.73.

<sup>48</sup> Selwyn N. (2004). *op.cit* p.346).

<sup>49</sup> Warschauer, M. (2004). *op.cit* p.203

dissertation too.<sup>50</sup> As stated in my introduction, there are Western teleological and epistemological assumptions implicit within Technological determinism. Nevertheless, my non- white positionality and use of a decolonial epistemology arguably adds more strength and significance to the arguments I present. Although my non- positionality does not make me a ‘spokesperson’ for marginalised communities, it did influence my desire to apply critical theories to this study. The application of CRT particularly removes the likelihood of this study being impacted and/or replicating (unconscious) implicit bias. As will be advanced in Chapter 3 in more detail, Application of a decolonial methodology like CRT also means that my work offers a more theoretical and conceptually nuanced approach to digital inequality studies. It differs from Selwyn and Waeschauer, whose understanding of the digital divide that continues to be entrenched in Eurocentric epistemological biasness. This is why from a (critical) EDI perspective these works can be viewed as merely acting from the same deficit digital behaviour model seen in first level digital studies, which failed to critique the wider societal structures that creates digital inequality and holds them there.

In the last five years, a new perspective has appeared within digital divides scholarship.<sup>51</sup> A ‘third level’ digital divide has emerged where the positive and negative outcomes of internet usage are now discussed. This focus is the main focal point of ‘*The Digital Divide*’ by Jan Van Dijk.<sup>52</sup> This book is worthy of attention, due to it being written in 2020; the year when digital inequality was brought into sharper focus globally, due to Covid -19 lockdowns.<sup>53</sup> Dijk is also an extremely well respected, ‘digital divides’ scholar who has contributed to this field for over twenty-five years.<sup>54</sup> Yet , Van Dijk cites the “the most important negative outcomes of Internet

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<sup>50</sup> Hudson, D. (2012). *op.cit* p.75)

<sup>51</sup> Dijk, J. van. (2020). *op.cit*

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*

<sup>53</sup> Child Poverty Action Group. (2021) Digital Exclusion During the Pandemic. Available:

[https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwientjll7f6AhWMUcAKHcZdABAQFnoECAQQAO&url=https%3A%2Fpag.org.uk%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Ffiles%2Fpolicypost%2FDigital-exclusion-during-the-pandemic\\_0.pdf&usq=AOvVaw3dmI6ge78AcyUBZinaZMTd](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwientjll7f6AhWMUcAKHcZdABAQFnoECAQQAO&url=https%3A%2Fpag.org.uk%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Ffiles%2Fpolicypost%2FDigital-exclusion-during-the-pandemic_0.pdf&usq=AOvVaw3dmI6ge78AcyUBZinaZMTd) [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2022]

<sup>54</sup> Dijk, J. van. (2020). *op.cit*

use” are issues relating to “excessive use”, “cybercrime and abuse” and “loss of security and privacy”.<sup>55</sup> It is extremely problematic, especially from an EDI perspective, that Van Dijk does not mention barriers to equal access for marginalised and minoritised communities in particular. This is a glaring oversight. It supports Jaeger’s (2012) anti-ableist assertion that “issues of internet accessibility for people with disabilities [still] receive little attention in the media, the government, scholarship and general public discourse”.<sup>56</sup> It is additionally a ‘colour blind’ approach which ignores how Race and other intersectional identities can worsen the internet issues Dijk mentions, such as cyber abuse that is explicitly racist or transphobic or homophobic in nature or increased loss of online privacy for BIPOC communities due to internet surveillance that amplifies racist policing.<sup>57</sup>

Dijk’s theoretical oversight confirms that my dissertation is addressing an important gap by considering multifaceted inequalities experienced within the digital sphere that marginalised and minorities communities experience, and its emphasis on intersectionality. My dissertation is situated within a small body of work that digresses from techno-deterministic narratives and discusses “intersectional explanations and solutions to inequality”.<sup>58</sup> Rather than generically looking at how ‘IT’ shapes identities and experiences, scholars such as E.J Helper, Zhen and Walsham show how ones’ social positioning within intersecting social structures creates a subjective IT experience.<sup>59</sup> . By viewing inequalities from an intersectional lens, these newer works offer a more meaningful and insightful approach to our understanding of digital inequality. They transcend simplistic, traditional definitions of the digital divide by conveying

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.* p.104

<sup>56</sup> Jaeger, P. T. (2022) *Disability and the Internet: Confronting a Digital Divide*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers (p.10)

<sup>57</sup> Amnesty International (2021). ‘*Ban dangerous facial recognition technology that amplifies racist policing*’. Available: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/01/ban-dangerous-facial-recognition-technology-that-amplifies-racist-policing/#:%7E:text=%E2%80%9CFacial%20recognition%20risks%20being%20weaponized,Rights%20Researcher%20at%20Amnesty%20International>. [Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> July 2022]

<sup>58</sup> Helper E J (2021). *Digital disconnect, op.cit* p.18

<sup>59</sup> Helper, *ibid*, Zheng, Y. & Walsham, G. (2021) Inequality of what? An intersectional approach to digital inequality under Covid-19. *Information and organization*. 31 (1), 100341. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2021.100341> [Accessed 15th June 2022]

that “digital inequalities are more complicated than a gap between the connected and disconnected [because there are] multiple layers and gradations of exclusion.”<sup>60</sup> Their use of Intersectionality also means these works recognises people as “actors within multiple hegemonies, hierarchies and class structures”, rather than simply ‘users’ who interact with machines/ the internet.<sup>61</sup> By “treating individuals as social actors rather than just users” this expands our attention to the “subjectivities and embodied, discursive and material experience of individuals [and leads to a consideration of] their vulnerabilities, agency and resilience when addressing the issue of digital inequality”.<sup>62</sup> In other words, a consideration of Intersectionality directs researchers to conceive of newer and more accurate definitions of the digital inequality which reflect realities that marginalised and minoritised communities will face, such as C. Gilliard’s definition of ‘digital redlining’ which is viewed as a more accurate term than that “The digital divide”.<sup>63</sup> In his words, ‘the digital divide’ is a noun; “it is the consequence of many forces. In contrast, ‘digital redlining’ is a verb, the "doing" of difference, a "doing" whose consequences reinforce existing class [and other societal] structures”.<sup>64</sup>

These authors ultimately show why a dissertation like mine which takes an intersectional approach to digital inequality is needed. My work provides an important lens for academic libraries within RLULK to understand how the internet can serve to reinforce existing inequalities across “race, class, gender, age and ability and other identities”.<sup>65</sup> It accounts for the “multifaceted [nature] of digital inequality” our students from marginalised and minoritised communities can face and aids in re-conceptualising definitions of digital inequality which only

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<sup>60</sup> Helper, *ibid*, p.1

<sup>61</sup> Zheng, Y. & Walsham, G. (2021). *op.cit* (p.4)

<sup>62</sup> *ibid*

<sup>63</sup> Gilliard, C. (2017). *The Pedagogy and the Logic of platforms* Available: <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2017/7/pedagogy-and-the-logic-of-platforms> [Accessed 15h July 2022]

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*

<sup>65</sup> *ibid* p.1

take into account accessibility, literacy and skills due to their “failure to examine digital technology as being implicated in complex and *intersectional* systems of power.”<sup>66</sup>

## **2. Digital Policies of UK Academic Libraries**

Given the focus of this study on questions of digital poverty through the lens of academic libraries’ digital policies, the ensuing section will critically appraise academic universities’ literature on their digital policies.

A “digital policy concerns utilising and promoting the opportunities offered by digitalisation [techno-determinism] and includes regulation of digital and electronic communications, network and information security, frequency policy and issues concerning [digital inequalities] and digital infrastructure”.<sup>67</sup> One would hope that any academic library would have a digital policy which similarly defines its digital aims and vision for its patrons in line with its institutional strategy.

However, when reviewing the digital policies and/or digital strategies of UK academic libraries, several limitations become evident. There is a seeming lack of a centralised and unifying, fixed definition of what an academic library digital policy should be or what it should be named. This makes it extremely difficult to pin down the digital policies of UK University Libraries, and to research and critically evaluate them.

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<sup>66</sup> Zheng, Y. & Walsham, G. (2021). *op.cit* p.1

<sup>67</sup> Government Offices of Sweden (no date), ‘*Digital Policies*’: Available: <https://www.government.se/government-policy/digital-policy/> [Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> august 2022]

For example, The University of Leeds has multiple policies. It has a website called ‘*Digital Practice Leeds*’ which focusses on the ‘Digital Literacy Framework’.<sup>68</sup> However, on a separate page they have ‘*Digital Transformation, University of Leeds Strategy 2020-2030*’, which sets out digital aims and objectives.<sup>69</sup> This particular policy seems to be a much more centralised policy which covers multiple components that belong to a wider University Strategy rather than the Library’s own digital policy. It is impossible to know whether University of Leeds library incorporates both the *Digital Literacy Framework* and the *University of Leeds Strategy*, or only incorporates a ‘*Digital Preservation Policy for Leeds University Library*’ which was also found online.<sup>70</sup>

For the University of Birmingham, a personal login was required to view their digital strategy and this strategy was created by the University’s IT Services rather than the Library Services. When I emailed Library Services and asked them about their digital strategy, a copy of ‘*UOB digital literacy framework*’ was provided. However, like University of Leeds Library’s ‘Digital Preservations Policy’, this is a policy with a very specific, narrow (and traditional) focus and does not encompass wider issues of digital inequality.<sup>71</sup>

For UCL, searching for their strategy brought up both the ‘*UCL Library Services Strategy 2019-22*’ and a ‘*UCL Library Services e-strategy*’.<sup>72</sup> The UCL Library Services Strategy only has a few sentences about improving information literacy skills. The e-strategy provides a framework within which the following UCL Library Services strategies operate. These focus on one-journals strategy, e-learning strategy (in preparation), digitisation policy and an

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<sup>68</sup> University of Leeds. (2022). ‘Digital Literacy’, Available: <https://digitalpractice.leeds.ac.uk/framework/> [Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2022]

<sup>69</sup> University of Leeds. (2021). *Digital Transformation, University of Leeds Strategy 2020-2030*. Available: <https://spotlight.leeds.ac.uk/strategy-digital-transformation/index.html> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2022]

<sup>70</sup> University of Leeds. (2019). *Digital Preservation Policy for Leeds University Library*

<sup>71</sup> University of Birmingham. (no date) ‘*UOB digital literacy framework*’

<sup>72</sup> University College London. (no date). ‘*UCL Library Services Strategy 2019-22*’. Available: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/sites/library/files/library-strategy-2019-22.pdf> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> August 2022] ; University college London. (2022). ‘*UCL Library Services e-strategy*’. Available: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/about-us/policies/ucl-library-services-e-strategy> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2022].

information literacy statement.<sup>73</sup> This supports the view that Academic Libraries choose to focus on different digital components on an ad hoc basis. Worryingly, the components mainly focus on digital literacy skills and accessing technology, which are traditional conceptions of the digital divide and do not consider newer theorisation<sup>74</sup>.

Policies and/or strategies that specifically look at digital inequality seem to be separate digital strategies that were created in the wake of Covid-19. For instance, Universities like Staffordshire loaned out laptops to their students.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, University of Manchester has a detailed publication focussing on what it can do as an institution to solve digital inequality.<sup>76</sup> Whilst these attempts are noble and have undoubtedly helped students and staff, they once again follow the traditional conceptualisation (first level and second level) of the digital divide.

An exemplary digital policy which is written by Library Services, and covers digital literacy skills, digital inequality and digital confidence as one centralised plan, is provided by The University of Greenwich.<sup>77</sup> More significantly, this is a digital strategy that paid specific attention to (basic) EDI principles. They directly mention 'Inclusivity and culture' in direct relation to digital services, stating "we will deliver digital with respect for the full range of human diversity, working for as many of our students and staff as possible".<sup>78</sup>

Yet admittedly, this can be seen as a superficially descriptive statement or a mere statement of intent as the University of Greenwich does not state what critical work is needed in order to

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid*

<sup>74</sup> *ibid*

<sup>75</sup> Staffordshire University. (2021) 'University offers support to help bridge digital divide'. Available: <https://www.staffs.ac.uk/news/2021/01/university-offers-support-to-help-bridge-digital-divide> [Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> August 2022]

<sup>76</sup> University of Manchester. (no date). 'On Digital Inequalities'. Available: <https://www.policy.manchester.ac.uk/publications/on-digital-inequalities/> [Accessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2022]

<sup>77</sup> University of Greenwich. (2022). 'Digital Strategy'. Available: <https://www.gre.ac.uk/it-and-library/digital-strategy> [Accessed. 15<sup>th</sup> August 2022]

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*, p.1

ensure this outcome. ‘Diversity and Inclusion’ have become buzzwords for organisations ‘brand reputation’, especially after the wake of the racist murder of George Floyd in 2020 (Rest in Peace).<sup>79</sup> Universities are increasingly viewing themselves as brands, as proven by ‘*Digital at the core: a 2030 strategy framework for university leaders*’ by JISC.<sup>80</sup> Within JISC’s report, diversity is mentioned seemingly as a means to serve corporate interests rather than as EDI commitments.<sup>81</sup> For example, JISC state they are aware that heterogenous student population comes into universities with a different set of digital experiences and expectations.<sup>82</sup> The underlying sentiment is that this is a corporate user experience requirement of understanding ‘customer centricity’, rather than a critical hegemonic understanding of techno-determinism and its embedded privileged assumptions about the shape of digital practice, who benefits from digital practices and under what conditions instruction about digital practices should be given.”<sup>83</sup> Similarly, JISC view using the data of students as imperative for digital transformation. They worryingly state that applying the same data driven design principles which Netflix, Apple and Uber employ to higher education would “transform [the] way that our stakeholder experience learning, teaching, research and professional services.”<sup>84</sup> However, this is completely at odds with digital equity aims since “surveillance, personalisation [and other forms of] information capitalism that aim to predict and modify human behaviour” negatively discriminate against “persons of colour [and] lower income student”.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, literature which explores the links between technology and Racism is highlighted in the next section below.

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<sup>79</sup> Hudson, D. (2020). ‘*The Displays: On Anti-Racist Study and Institutional Study*’. Available: <https://www.uproot.space/features/hudson-the-displays> [Accessed 12th August 2022]

<sup>80</sup> JISC. (no date). ‘*Digital at the core: a 2030 strategy framework for university leaders*’. Available: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/digital-strategy-framework-for-university-leaders>. [Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2022]

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*

<sup>82</sup> *ibid*

<sup>83</sup> Hicks, A. & Lloyd, A. (2021) Deconstructing information literacy discourse: Peeling back the layers in higher education. *Journal of librarianship and information science*. 53 (4), 559–571. Available: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0961000620966027> [Accessed 15th July 2022]

<sup>84</sup> JISC. (no date). *op.cit.* p.35

<sup>85</sup> Gilliard, C. (2017). *op.cit.* p1



### 3. The links between Technology and Inequity

Papendieck's brilliant article explains how Technology within education reinforces inequity and, in line with my work, succinctly argues that the lack of "deep interrogation of the inequities and injustices that currently exist within [technology] [is] bound to lead to unfulfilled promises of digitally inspired reform.<sup>86</sup> Munro excellent article also focuses on why the neoliberal environment of universities in particular ultimately leads to continued investment in technologies which ultimately "disadvantages learners from outside the predominant culture".<sup>87</sup>

Yet looking at the links between Technology and Inequity is a relatively under-theorised and ahistorical area of Librarianship despite the relevance of the issues cited above for LIS.<sup>88</sup> Authors from the fields of Black digital Humanities, Sociology, Communication and media seem to empirically and theoretically develop this topic the most, rather than Librarianship.<sup>89</sup> For example, Noble shows how internet search results are not neutral when algorithms reflect and reinforce racism and other biases.<sup>90</sup> Benjamin similarly offers a sobering view of the inherent bias within technological automation and design.<sup>91</sup> These works acutely highlight the limitations of the 'third level' digital divides studies by showing how internet experiences can be detrimentally impacted if you belong to a marginalised community. Similarly, Nakamura

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<sup>86</sup> Papendieck, Adam. (2018). 'Technology for Equity and Social Justice in Education: A Critical Issue Overview'. *Texas Education Review*. 6. 1-9. 10.15781/T2891278V (p.4)

Available:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325020339\\_Technology\\_for\\_Equity\\_and\\_Social\\_Justice\\_in\\_Education\\_A\\_Critical\\_Issue\\_Overview](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325020339_Technology_for_Equity_and_Social_Justice_in_Education_A_Critical_Issue_Overview) [Accessed 15th June 2022] 4

<sup>87</sup> Munro, M. (2018.) The complicity of digital technologies in the marketisation of UK higher education: exploring the implications of a critical discourse analysis of thirteen national digital teaching and learning strategies. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*. 15 (1), 1–20. P.7. Available: <https://educationaltechnologyjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41239-018-0093-2> [Accessed 15th June 2022]

<sup>88</sup> Barron, Simon & Preater, Andrew. (2018). 'Critical Systems librarianship' in Nicholson P K & Seale. M. (eds.) *The politics of theory and the practice of critical librarianship*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press. Pp .87-113

<sup>89</sup> Noble, S. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: NYU Press ; Benjamin, R. (2019) *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Newark: Polity Press ; Nakamura. L (2020). 'Understanding Digital Racism after Covid 19' Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2V0PNzYbYwQ> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>90</sup> Noble, S. (2018) *op.cit*

<sup>91</sup> Benjamin, R. (2019) *op.cit*

makes a compelling case for why ‘Digital Racism’ should be its own analytical concept and why a ‘colour blind’ approach which ignores Race simply hides and consequently reinforces internet issues .<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, Out of the 79 “public scholars of colour who produce research and distribute knowledge about the intersections of Race and Technology for the ‘*Center for Critical Race + Digital Studies*’,” only 3 come from a Library Science background.<sup>93</sup> These include assistant professors: Tonia Sutherland, University of Hawaii, Megan Threats, University of Michigan, and Amelia Gibson, university of Maryland.<sup>94</sup> Whilst acknowledging that knowledge production within Academia is disproportionately dominated by Global North scholars, there is clearly an urgent need for UK librarians to look at this issue and contribute solutions that are more appropriate for British academic library settings in particular.<sup>95</sup>

The few texts that do look at the links between Technology and Racism from a Library perspective include works by Barron and Preater, Farkas and Reidmas.<sup>96</sup> There is also an online journal of ‘*Critical Digital Librarianship*’.<sup>97</sup> I personally found the journal and its article to be more suitable for audiences with specialised knowledge.<sup>98</sup> This is in contrast to the works cited above whose subject focus is not as niche and so strongly engage readers as to why Library Technology is not neutral.

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<sup>92</sup> Nakamura. L (2020) *op.cit*

<sup>93</sup> *Center for Critical Race + Digital Studies*. (2022). Available: <https://www.criticalracedigitalstudies.com/people> [Accessed 15th July 2022]

<sup>94</sup> *ibid*

<sup>95</sup> Collyer, F. M. (2018) Global patterns in the publishing of academic knowledge: Global North, global South. *Current sociology*. [Online] 66 (1), 56–73.

<sup>96</sup> Barron, Simon & Preater, Andrew. (2018). *op.cit* ; Farkas M. (2017) Never neutral: critical librarianship and technology.(In practice). *American libraries* (Chicago, Ill.). 48 (1-2), 70 Available: <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2017/01/03/never-neutral-critlib-technology/> . [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2022] ; Reidmas. M. (2016) ‘*Algorithmic Bias in Library Discovery Systems*’. Available: <https://matthew.reidsrow.com/articles/173> [accessed 15th June 2022]

<sup>97</sup> *Journal of Critical Digital Librarianship*. (no date). Available: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/jcdl/> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>98</sup> *ibid*

For instance, Reidmas' work is very similar to Noble's because he highlights the existence of biasness in library discovery systems and shows some of the biases and offensive search results he found using his Library Discovery. Barron and Preater similarly talk about many of the ways library systems reinforce inequality, through the commercial aims of eBook suppliers and the power relations inherent within the creation of library software and digital libraries).<sup>99</sup> The book aligns with my work by also calling for librarians to question the underlying values, assumptions and power relations embedded within their institutions' and their digital practices.<sup>100</sup>

However, I disagree with the authors proclamation that "with technological developments to be aware of [...]workers have little time or energy to digest and discuss theory relevant to their practice and less still to critically reflect on how to apply theory to practice".<sup>101</sup> Critical Librarians similar to me would vehemently contest this, as praxis is at the heart of our work and our values. Admittedly though, I have to disagree with Farkas assertion that "Critical librarianship has become a force that pervades every area of our work [including] technology", when I seem to be one of the few Critical Librarians who is conducting research in this area. Assessing key Critical Librarianship and Decolonising texts in the final section of this literature review confirms that debates around "decolonising the curriculum and those regarding the role of technology tend to be siloed in different disciplinary fields".<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Barron, Simon & Preater, Andrew. (2018). *op.cit* pp 93-99

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*

<sup>101</sup> *ibid*, p. 109

<sup>102</sup> Czerniewisc. L (2021). *op.cit.* p.4

#### **4. Critical librarianship and Decolonisation in Academic Libraries**

Within the last 10 years, “Critical Librarianship has made its way into the mainstream of library and information science through conferences, scholarly publications, social media, and other outlets”.<sup>103</sup> Critical Librarianship differs from the performative, conceptual framework of EDI in LIS which places emphasis on improving “demographic inclusion and individualistic narratives of biasness” within the workforce.<sup>104</sup> This preoccupation with ‘diverse representation’ amongst staff and collections is undoubtedly sincere and “can represent a key intervention where racism manifests as exclusion”.<sup>105</sup> The absence of addressing how libraries are complicit in structural racism through the absence of structural critique is a key weakness of normalised EDI work in academic libraries. Instead, Critical Librarianship directly challenges the library’s sector “false idea of its own objectivity and neutrality” and highlights the production and permanence of White Supremacy within LIS institutions and practices.<sup>106</sup>

Perhaps the richest critical discussion surrounding the issue of Race within Librarianship is “*Knowledge Justice Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory*”, edited by Sofia Y Leung and Jorge R Lopez-McKnight.<sup>107</sup> Methodologically, it stands out because it employs Critical Race Theory (CRT) which “is not commonly employed in LIS except by a handful of scholars, and its presence in the field is marginal at best”.<sup>108</sup> This fact underscores the uniqueness and importance of the methodology of my dissertation which is based on CRT principles. CRT is important because it directly draws attention to institutional

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<sup>103</sup> Ferretti, J. A. (2020). Building a Critical Culture: How Critical Librarianship Falls Short in the Workplace. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 14 (1), 134-152.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2020.14.1.10> [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> August 2022]

<sup>104</sup> Hudson, D. J. (2017). On ‘Diversity’ as Anti-Racism in Library and Information Studies: A Critique. *Journal of critical library and information studies*. 1 (1) (p.1). Available: <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/6>. [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>105</sup> *ibid*, p.10

<sup>106</sup> Drabinski, E. (2019). What is critical about critical librarianship? *op.cit*

. p.49

<sup>107</sup> Leung Y. S. & McKnight López R. J (eds.). (2021). *op.cit*.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid*, p.7

and structural forms of racism, which as mentioned is missing in normative EDI frameworks. Meaningful change cannot result unless we first understand how these structures came about, whose interests they serve, and what perpetuates them.

*'Narratives Expansions Interpreting Decolonisation in Academic Libraries'* is also essential reading, especially as it is from a British academic context. It too uses critical theoretical frameworks to outline a powerful vision of what [real] decolonised anti-racism work and to move away from the superficial and/or non-treatment of Race.<sup>109</sup>

My only criticism of these works and the larger movements which they represent is that their focus is limited to how Race and Power operate within library collections, metadata management, library spaces scholarly communication, epistemic supremacy, teaching and learning and research methods. As repeatedly mentioned in this review, Technological issues are ignored or under-theorised by Librarians. This is despite the fact that Tonia Sutherland from the University of Hawaii, who, as mentioned, contributes to the *Centre for Critical Race Digital Studies*' has an introductory section in Knowledge Justice. There could have been an opportunity for Sutherland to discuss technological issues but she instead narrates her journey into Critical Librarianship.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, opportunities to discuss the links between inequity and technology are missed in *'Narratives Expansions Interpreting Decolonisation in Academic Libraries'*. There are contributions from librarians who have created workshops for students that challenge the neutrality of the internet but are positioned as examples of critical pedagogy rather than critical digital praxis.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Crilly, J. & Everitt, R. (2021) *Narrative Expansions: Interpreting Decolonisation in Academic Libraries*. London: Facet Publishing.

<sup>110</sup> Sutherland T. 'Introduction to Part III' in Sofia Y. Leung & Jorge R. López-McKnight (eds.). (2021). *op.cit.* pp 219-222

<sup>111</sup> Duncan A, Miller Eades V, Ramejkis, 'Opening Spaces for Creative and Critical Enquiry' in Crilly, J. & Everitt, R. (2021). *op.cit.* pp.140-150

My literature review therefore demonstrates that my work has the potential to help offset gaps within Critical Librarianship and LIS Decolonisation as a field. It also fills theorisation gaps on technological bias research with a much-needed LIS perspective and strengthens traditional 'Digital Divides Research'. It additionally challenges the default of digital policies practices of UK Academic Libraries. My work therefore makes a much-needed contribution to improved LIS research and improved LIS practices.

## CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Critical Race Theory

My dissertation's methodology is theoretically and epistemologically underpinned by Critical Race Theory (CRT). Pioneered by Kimberle Crenshaw, this framework allows researchers like me to define, expose and address the ways in which race and racism are play a role within our society in a much more meaningful way.<sup>112</sup>

It is said that CRT has five major components or tenets (1) the notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) the idea of an 'interest convergence' (whites will promote advances for blacks only when they also promote white interests); (3) the social construction of race; (4) the idea of 'white' storytelling and the need for 'non white' counter-storytelling; and (5) the notion that whites are recipients of civil rights legislation.<sup>113</sup> . When we analyse these tenets in more details, several concepts are revealed which have relevance for examining digital inequality within a UK academic Library setting.

For example, a key concept of CRT is the acknowledgement of White supremacy as a deeply rooted aspect of society.<sup>114</sup> This renders all institutions as 'non neutral' because "all systems inherently reflect the biases that of the culture that created them".<sup>115</sup> Acknowledging that "neutrality" is not actually neutral because it perpetuates inequality and the existing status quo is also central to CRT.<sup>116</sup> The centrality of 'whiteness' is widely acknowledged issue within

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<sup>112</sup> Garcia, N. M. et al. (2018) QuantCrit: rectifying quantitative methods through critical race theory. *Race, ethnicity and education*. [Online] 21 (2), 149–157. P.150 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2017.1377675> . [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> July 2022]

<sup>113</sup> Gillborn, D. et al. (2020) *Critical race theory*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

<sup>114</sup> DeCuir-Gunby, Jessica. Chapman K T. Schutz A. P (eds). (2019). *Understanding Critical Race Research Methods and Methodologies: Lessons from the field*. Routledge: NY

<sup>115</sup> Martin, J. M. (2021) Records, Responsibility, and Power: An Overview of Cataloguing Ethics. *Cataloging & classification quarterly*. [Online] 59 (2-3), 281–304. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2020.1871458> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>116</sup> Jaeger, Paul T. and Sarin, Lindsay C. (2016) "All Librarianship is Political: Educate Accordingly," *The Political Librarian*: Vol. 2, Article 8. Available: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/pollib/vol2/iss1/8> [Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> August 2022]

both Academia and Librarianship.<sup>117</sup> My literature review also highlighted that Technology reflects and reinforces existing structural inequalities. Therefore, the application of CRT to digital inequality is extremely relevant.

Adopting a theoretical framework of CRT has the power to promote better understanding digital inequality, due to its concept of Intersectionality. Black and Asian communities are often grouped together under terms such as ‘BAME’, ‘BIPOC’ ‘people of colour’, and/or ethnic minorities, when in reality their intersectional social and cultural differences can create subjectivity of lived experiences. This is why CRT application is arguably needed by RLUK in order to create an ‘equitable’ digital shift as it would acknowledge that students from heterogenous marginalised communities will face subjective digital inequalities based upon intersectional factors like class, gender, religion, disability, sexuality and other social characteristics.

There are some who have ignorantly criticised Intersectionality as creating a ‘hierarchy of oppression and victimhood and misconstrued statements that this theory represents a ‘new caste system’ which does not allow room for the idea that straight, white men can also suffer in life.<sup>118</sup> In response to this flawed thinking, I would argue that when necessary, unique cultural differences and/or unique discrimination experienced by different ethnic groups can be uniquely investigated. For instance, ‘Asian Critical Race Theory’ ‘Latino Critical Race Theory’ ‘Queer Critical Race Theory’ and ‘Dis/ability Critical Race Theory’ exist too.<sup>119</sup> For me, Crenshaw’s standard CRT with its focus on Intersectionality means that any gendered, sexual, ableness and other intersectional lived experience differences can still be accounted for.

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<sup>117</sup> Schlesselman-Tarango, G. (ed). (2017) *Topographies of whiteness : mapping whiteness in library and information science*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press ; Crilly, J. & Everitt, R. (2021). *op.cit.* p.xxiii

<sup>118</sup> Vox Media. (2022). ‘The Intersectionality Wars’. Available: <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination> [accessed 15th July 2022]

<sup>119</sup> Sofia Y. Leung & Jorge R. López-McKnight (eds.). (2021). *op.cit.* p.12



Similarly, CRT's base theoretical aim of critically subverting hetero-normative dominant paradigms and epistemologies, through 'Counter Storying' and their commitment for real social justice can also highlight the reality of intersectional lived experiences.<sup>120</sup> Therefore, I believe this framework remains widely applicable for multicultural academic library settings and for promoting equity-based digital work in particular.

For researchers and, in the case of this study, digital inequality policy makers, we need to recognise that our understandings of the (digital) ontological and the epistemological are subjectively influenced by our (intersectional) status quo social identities and Positioning. By acknowledging Positionality and recognising the exclusion and marginalisation of minoritised and marginalised groups from the social 'centre', CRT "works towards not just centering experiences and identities that mirror our own but asking who even gets to be in the room" when making policy decisions about digital inequalities.<sup>121</sup> If we are truly to create impactful work that is inclusive and addresses issues of equality and equity in the digital sphere, then our research requires self-reflexivity and engagement with ongoing historical, social, political, and economic structures and power relations which is what CRT demands from scholars.

The fact that use of CRT remains rare in LIS research also highlights the necessity of its theoretical need in my study. Among the few notable studies that have adopted CRT are works by Hines, Rapchak, Gibson Hassel, Threats and Dubar.<sup>122</sup> As far as I am aware my study is also the first LIS study to apply CRT to digital inequality. I did find a thesis which applies CRT

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<sup>120</sup> Gillborn, D. et al. (2020) *Critical race theory op.cit*

<sup>121</sup> Natarajan V. (2021) 'Counterstoried Soaces and Unknowns A Queer South Asian Librarian Dreaming' in Sofia Y. Leung & Jorge R. López-McKnight (eds.). (2021). *Knowledge Justice op.cit*

<sup>122</sup> Hines, S. (2019) Leadership Development for Academic Librarians: Maintaining the Status Quo? *Canadian journal of academic librarianship*. 41–19 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v4.29311> [Accessed 22nd august 2022] ; Dunbar, A. W. (2008) *Critical race information theory: Applying a CRITical race lens to Information Studies*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing ; Rapchick M. (2019) 'That Which Cannot Be Named: The Absence of Race in the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, *Journal of Radical Librarianship* Vol. 5 pp. 173–96 [Avaliable: <https://journal.radicallibrarianship.org/index.php/journal/article/view/33/51>] Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> July 2022] ;

to the Digital Divide.<sup>123</sup> This does significantly differentiate from my study though as the author looks at African American students who suffer from digital inequalities from an educational perspective, whereas mine is focussing on RLUK academic librarians' definition of digital inequality from a Critical LIS perspective.<sup>124</sup> Nevertheless, this thesis confirms that when it comes to digital inequality, if LIS is to lead in their communities (whether these communities are racially diverse or not) they must engage with structural frameworks like CRT, that recognise and address how inequity shapes social institutions like UK universities and their libraries and consequently our professional practices and values.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Hollins, Stacy Gee. (2015). "*The Digital Divide Through the Lens of Critical Race Theory: The Digitally Denied*" Available: <https://irl.umsl.edu/dissertation/132> [accessed 15th July 2022]

<sup>124</sup> Hollins, Stacy Gee. (2015) *ibid*

<sup>125</sup> Gibson, A. et al. (2018) 'Critical Race Theory in the LIS Curriculum', in *Re-envisioning the MLS: Perspectives on the Future of Library and Information Science Education*. Emerald Publishing Limited. pp. 49–70. (p.67)

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODS

### Qualitative Methodology

My study used qualitative research-based methods. Qualitative methodology is extremely appropriate for this type of study, given its potential to offer context-rich insights to better understand the origins of personal and institutional digital inequality definitions. Indeed, its value lies in the fact that it allows “researchers to understand behaviour and institutions by getting to know the persons involved and their values, rituals, symbols, beliefs, and emotions.”<sup>126</sup> Qualitative based methods also had the potential to provide much needed insight into digital inequality definitions because analysing interviewer responses using CRT could demonstrate whether Eurocentric ways of knowing and understanding of digital inequality had distorted definitions and responses to solving digital inequality. From a CRT perspective, and as will be shown in my subsequent chapters, the use of Qualitative methodologies created opportunities for librarians from marginalised identities, to have agency and a voice around discussions of topics that they had traditionally been excluded from.<sup>127</sup>

Drawing on a Quantitative methodology would have been unsuitable for my study because numeric data and statistics are unable to offer such a rich understanding of viewpoints, people and the social and cultural contexts in which they live.<sup>128</sup> It therefore would have run counter to my goals of interrogating, critique, and questioning epistemology around digital inequality. It should be noted that for equity-based research in general, Quantitative methodology is also often unsuitable. There is a danger of that quantitative data can be used to frustrate equity and

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<sup>126</sup> Frankfort-Nachmias, C., and Nachmias, D. (2000). *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*. New York: Worth (p.257)

<sup>127</sup> Bernal, D. (2002). ‘Critical Race Theory, Latino Critical Theory and Critical Raced-Gendered Epistemologies: Recognizing Students of Color as Holders and Creators of Knowledge’. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 105–126 (p.116) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800107>. [Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2022]

<sup>128</sup> Crawford C, Demark S, Gillborn, Warmingtin. P (2019) in DeCuir-Gunby, Jessica. Chapman K T. Schutz A. P (eds). (2019). *Understanding Critical Race Research Methods and Methodologies op.cit*

social change, because numbers and categories can be gathered and analysed in ways that reflect hegemonic interests, assumptions and perceptions.<sup>129</sup>

### **Research Method: Individual interviews**

My research method draws on interviews with librarians in academic and national libraries. Individual interviews enabled me to have detailed in-depth discussions which provided substantial and context-rich qualitative data. In the end, the number of interviews achieved was 5. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The interviews lasted between 40mins – 1 hour.

### **Interview Questions**

My Theoretical Framework of CRT guided how I designed my Interview questions. Some scholars may view applying a theory, which is determined *a priori*, to my questions is the antithesis of impartial research.<sup>130</sup> Yet I do not believe this negatively affected the quality and validity of my data. In fact, integrating CRT helped to guide my design process by providing a strong direction for the type of questions I asked and the themes I focused on. My questions were purposely designed to encourage critical thinking; to challenge librarians in unpacking the meaning making behind concepts such as ‘digital inequality’ and to begin to critically question why it matters who creates definitions and, consequently, who creates knowledge (epistemology). In this way I would argue that the type of questions I asked were a Critical Methodology in itself (see appendix for my interview questions).

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<sup>129</sup> *ibid*, p.127

<sup>130</sup> Mills, J. & Birks, M. (2014) *Qualitative methodology : a practical guide* Los Angeles: SAGE.

## **Sample**

The characteristics of the participants I interviewed are summarised in the table below. I have purposely kept information as concealed as possible (which is why I do not explicitly state whether institutions are Russell University Libraries or not), due the sensitivity of some the views I reveal in my next chapter and in line with the code of conduct that was agreed with the participants before the interview, to maintain their anonymity. I also use gender neutral pronouns to share interviewees responses in my next chapter for this reason too.

<b>Characteristics of Study Participants</b>				
Participants	Type of Institution	Role	Gender	Ethnicity
A	Academic Library	EDI officer	Queer Non-Binary	White
B	Academic Library	Associate Director/ Director equivalent	Cisgender	Non-White
C	Academic Library	Associate Director/ Director equivalent	Cisgender	White
D	Public Library	Associate Director/ Director equivalent	Cisgender	White
E	Public Library	EDI officer	Queer	Non-White

## **Recruitment**

The recruitment of the participants proved to be a major challenge. I initially aimed to recruit 5-7 librarians to participate in a focus group. I created an invitation email which was forwarded by my main contact at RLUK to the larger RLUK network. The email stated that I was doing a dissertation which was ‘looking at digital inequality from EDI/ Critical Race based frameworks’ . I asked for colleagues who were interested in participating in my focus group to contact me and made clear what was expected of them, how long the interviews would take

and the type of questions I wanted to ask. Unfortunately, I received no replies to that email, despite my main RLUK contact resending it a few days later.

In response to the non-responses, I decided to take advantage of both mine and RLUK significant online library network and tweeted a callout for volunteers on Twitter. My supervisor and I decided to create a more 'generic' sounding tweet, stating that I was leading a focus group on digital inequality and inclusion rather than 'an EDI focus group on digital inequality and inclusion'. Whilst the tweet generated good online engagement, it unfortunately did not generate much interest materially. No one contacted me outside of Twitter to express an interest in participating in my focus group.

This led my RLUK contact to personally ask people from their close network to consider participating in my research. It appeared like I would definitely be able to have a focus group of 5 librarians on 1 day, and one to one interview with 3 other librarians on 3 different dates. Yet, on the day of my focus group only 1 from the 5 librarians turned up. Thankfully, the other 3 librarians fulfilled their promises. Therefore, I was still able to reach my target of having data from 5 participants. During one of my interviews, I was also able to interview 2 librarians from the same institution which was the closest I came to the group dynamics of what I would have experienced from a focus group.

There may be many reasons why recruitment was so hard but I vehemently believe that our profession's continued (white) sensitivity, fragility, and unwillingness to talk about Race should be seriously considered as a key reason why my focus groups received low support. Research by Samantha Hines reveals the lack of professional support and even pushback that

can be experienced from the wider Library community when EDI work is pursued.<sup>131</sup> Even though a ‘RLUK Decolonisation Group’ exists, my literature review has already highlighted how our field finds it much easier to discuss the ‘softer terms’ of *Diversity* and *Inclusion* and apply this externally to collections and staffing, rather than *White Supremacy* and how it manifests internally in Self. Whilst I chose to leave out the words ‘EDI’ and create a generic tweet in the hope this would attract less resistance, I did not consider that my Twitter activity reveals that I am a Critical Librarian who does not shy away from actively talking about uncomfortable truths. For Librarians still invested in misguided vocational awe and imbued in fragility which I defined in my introduction, my online identity may have caused apprehension about participation.

Had they participated, they would have seen how I employed a variety of techniques to ensure participant comfort during my interviews. To build trust with my participants, I asked them about their childhood aspirations as an ice breaker, in order to set a tone of vulnerability and openness. I also tried to emphasise my identity as an objective MA student wanting to hear their opinions, rather than as a Black critical librarian interrogating their ‘wokeness’. I was aware this could have created new tensions of allowing participants to reproduce racism without my ability to challenge them and the potential psychological harm and emotional labour such views from library colleagues could have had upon me.

Similarly, I was also aware as a *Black* MA student, it is often difficult to be viewed objectively. Indeed, in trying to encourage participant comfort, my racial constructs brought tensions which would not have affected a white researcher. For instance, I delivered the interviews with my laptop camera on to aid rapport and communication. However, this forced me to have to ask

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<sup>131</sup> Hines, S. (2019) *Leadership Development for Academic Librarians op.cit*

myself whether I was able to ‘wear my hair naturally as an Afro’. which can negatively emphasise a cultural-political identity and other microaggression attitudes, or whether I should straighten my hair and adopt a more ‘conventional European hairstyle’ for my interviews.<sup>132</sup> Although unfortunate, my experiences ultimately build further dimensions to Critical Methodology and Critical Librarianship.

My identity as a young MA student also had the potential to create other potential power imbalances in my interviews. For example, individuals who have power in their own organisations can carry that power into the interview setting. My tutor was helpful in giving me ways I could gain power over my research agenda such as not letting participants go off topic. My tutor also reminded me that those in well paid, powerful positions need to be thinking about racial issues and so I could direct the conversation how I wanted. Nevertheless, I was aware that any uncomfortable exchange had the ability to have ramifications for my career progression and/or how I am viewed by the wider Library network. To overcome such limitations, more academic writing is needed on how to discuss difficult topics in a professional context, especially those relating to issues regarding equity. This is addressed in my concluding chapter.

## **Data Analysis**

I analysed the data from these interviews by transcribing the interviews into Word documents. I coded the data into meaningful and relevant units and then categorised codes into categories

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<sup>132</sup> White. N. (2021). ‘*Black hair discrimination must be banned, equalities watchdog told*’. Available: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/black-hair-discrimination-watchdog-equalities-b1941567.html> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]



In order to avoid bias, I kept a list of all codes and codes I used to ensure equal transferability and creditability.

### **Overcoming Limitations**

As is evident from the foregoing discussion in this chapter, I took great theoretical care to ensure that the way the study was designed, implemented, and analysed mitigated any bias and ill-founded conclusions. I sought alternative ways to recruit suitable participants for the study and to overcome the problem of non-response or poor response. Although a larger sample size would have been preferable, the relatively small sample of the focus group does not undermine the validity of the findings from the study. Sample size is only crucial in quantitative research to understand causality, identify trends and patterns, and make generalisations with a high level of confidence. By contrast, the qualitative approaches and one-to one discussions with most of my participants allowed deeper exploration of the research topic with them.

## CHAPTER 5: KEY FINDINGS

This chapter presents and analyses the findings from my qualitative research. The qualitative coding process described in the previous chapter led to the development of the following codes and categories

### 'Definitions' and 'Criticality'.

- **Definitions**
  - Personal Definitions
    - Traditional definition of digital inequality
    - Decolonial and/or revisionist definition of digital inequality
  - Library Definitions
    - Library has an official definition
    - Library does not have an official definition
  - People making the definitions
    - thought the person who makes definition in general and/or definitions of digital inequality matters
    - thought the person who makes definitions in general and/or definitions of digital inequality doesn't matter
- **Criticality**
  - Awareness
    - Awareness and/or application of critical race theory/other decolonial theory to self and wider library praxis
    - lack of awareness and/or application of critical race theory/decolonial theory to self and wider library praxis

- How critical change can be achieved within a neo-liberal structure like the university
- Barriers to critical change being achieved in a neo-liberal structure like the university

## **Definitions**

This first category entails examining how academic librarians in my study (Librarians A,B,C,D,E) personally defined ‘Digital inequality’, how the libraries they work at defined ‘Digital Inequality’ and analysing their critical awareness about the importance of who creates definitions of Digital inequality.

### **Definitions: (personal definition)**

Analysis of the transcripts reveals a distinctive narrative of how digital inequality is personally defined by academic librarians. Perhaps unsurprisingly, librarians interviewed for this study expressed a definition that matched traditional first level and second level definitions of digital inequality, which position digital inequality as “a lack of access and connectivity to the internet and/or a lack of digital skills”.

Two respondents referred to ‘accessibility’ when they were asked to personally define digital inequality, with a particular reference to access to infrastructure. Librarian A stated: “*I think of accessibility in two ways where there is a move to digital platforms, there seems to be no consideration that people can’t ... don’t have the infrastructure to access things and that creates inequality*”. This traditional definition of digital inequality was mirrored by Participant B, who additionally recognised that “*When we talk about digital inequality its barriers in access to digital tools and services and infrastructures*”. Such definitions reduce people to

simply ‘users’ who interact with machines, which as explained in my literature review, takes attention away from the fact that people are complex, heterogeneous ‘social actors’ as a consequences of their intersectional social positioning .

Librarians C and D views also aligned with earlier scholarship mentioned in my literature review that considered computer usage and literacy physical access only. Librarian C stated “*that most older people haven’t even got a smartphone*” and Librarian D talking about rural areas and their lack of connectivity. These views did not take into account intersectionality of experience that will exist amongst ‘older people’ and ‘rural communities’, based on race, class, gender and other characteristics.

it was only Librarian E who displayed active awareness that the internet can serve to reinforce existing structural inequalities across race and gender especially.

Librarian E stated: *I guess for me .... Like ... I think for example how computing used to be really female focused industry and it was kind of taken away once it become big and then became dominated by men ... I guess I’m also very aware of algorithms and how they like reinforced biases [...] yeah, I find it interesting and use a bit of that in my trainings around you know if you type black women into Google you get all types of stereotypes coming up. So, stuff like that and I watched an interesting talk by a black woman about black women’s involvement and the democratising potential democratisation of digital platforms as a way of learning and sharing social justice messages, organising activism but also that kind of darker side to that in reference to ‘cancel culture’ and anti-wokeness, so that’s what [digital inequality for me] brings up.”*

This is the type of thoughtful and insightful definition which would result in meaningful policy change if more librarians were to embrace this definition. Librarian E clearly recognised intersectionality and how this subjective, intersectional material experience of people within multiple hegemonies, hierarchies, and class structures renders people as social actors rather than users.

### **Definitions: (Library Definition)**

Analysis of the transcripts suggests a problematic trend that many academic libraries seem to have not officially defined what digital inequality means as an institution or have not defined it as a formal policy.

As expressed in my literature review, I personally had difficulty finding digital policies of academic libraries. Based upon my interviews, it seems that this was not due to personal errors in searching but a reflection of broader institutional failing to formally engage with digital inequality. Librarian A faced difficulties finding evidence of institutional engagement stating: *“I haven't been able to find any policy... I can't find it...either that's because I can't find it or its not accessible and it exists somewhere”*. This implies that the digital inequality policy is either hidden or does not exist which then leads to questioning whether digital inequality is a key policy goal or priority for the library.

Similarly, Librarian B, also showed uncertainty as to whether their library had a formal definition or policy saying: *“I don't think there is a library definition of digital inequality (I think the university itself looks at digital inequalities as a barrier for its strategy, but it hasn't yet as far as I know defined what digital inequalities mean”*. The fact the university's

institutional strategy may mention digital inequalities, but it has not manifested to actual library work on how to solve it, alludes to arguments I made in my literature review; Digital Inequality is often reduced to superficial and descriptive statements by universities, in order to improve their perception as a brand.

Librarians D and E also confirmed that their library “*does not have a specific statement about [digital inequality]*” or even “*engage in explicit conversations about it*”, which once more implies a lack of priority assigned to this issue.

If librarians do not even know whether their university is even trying to combat digital inequality and/or cannot contribute to combatting digital inequality in their job role, since there is apparently no framework to guide their work, then this renders questioning the feasibility of RLUK’s Manifesto extremely valid. This is confirmed by the fact that the only librarian who gave an answer was Librarian C who stated, “*Well we talk about wellbeing a lot ....so we do stuff on our website around making things accessible [...].*” However, this is an overly traditional view of digital inequality which focusses on a too narrow aspect of digital inequality and does not consider systematic, structural changes that are necessary for RLUK to achieve their mission. It is also interesting that Librarian C and A worked for the same institution. Reasons for discrepancies in their answer are theorised later in my chapter.

### **Definitions: (People making the definitions)**

Analysis of the transcripts reveals there was a clear consensus amongst the librarians that the person who creates a digital inequality definition matters. Four from the five respondents directly mentioned that positionality of decision-making has implications for whether equity and equality can successfully occur.

As Librarian A put it: *“If you don't have diversity on decision-making bodies, how can things ever change? It's going to be similar people who probably have similar life experiences? They know other people have certain experiences, but they haven't experienced it themselves and don't know... [so] they end up with their own biases and that plays into policy.”*

Librarian E also stated *“if people in positions of authority and privilege, if they're the ones that are naming what inequality is then there's gonna be dynamics within that”*. RLUK librarians need to recognise how their positionality has affected the way their digital manifesto is written and why I argue it is in need of critical appraisal.

Given the centrality of ‘whiteness’ within both Academia and Librarianship, this is an issue which RLUK needs to first acknowledge if systematic digital change is to be created. RLUK librarians need to recognise how their positionality has affected the way their digital manifesto is written and how positionality of audience will affect how their digital manifesto is interpreted and received.

Librarian C stated: *it's really important, I'd say, to be very clear on what we mean by “digital inequality [...] as to who creates it...its obviously important that the audience understands what you mean by it so working with them (whoever they are) would be important. It's so easy to band around terms like this but not really yourself being clear on what it means”*.

The need to consider digital terminology and whether terms are inclusive and appropriate is exactly what my dissertation is highlighting. As I mentioned in my introduction and literature

review, mainstream Digital inequality discourse derives from Global North positionings and is from a Western epistemological, ontological and teleological viewpoint which excludes the experiences of marginalised and minoritised communities who are outside of these paradigms.<sup>133</sup> This is why Librarian D’s statement that boards need to “*engage with different people*” in order to be representative, is correct. Boards need to cut across race, gender, class and even people from different professions in order to develop terms that are equitable for all and so viewed positively by all.

No respondent stated that it does not matter who makes definitions in general and/or definitions of digital inequality, which again shows an understanding that inclusive representation matters if decision making is intended to be fair and equitable.

### **Criticality**

The second category is Criticality. I used it in light of my awareness that simply adding in different multicultural perspectives could be akin to the tokenistic performative change which is so heavily critiqued by Critical Librarianship. There is a need for Boards to have representation from people with critical awareness expertise.

### **Criticality: (Awareness)**

I used the code ‘Awareness’ to see whether librarians applied critical theory such as CRT or other decolonial theory to their work, and to test whether they recognised the institutional and societal structures that can implicate equity work. Such critical awareness is clearly necessary for creating equitable digital changes. My findings on Critical Awareness are presented below:

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<sup>133</sup> Hudson, D. (2012), ‘Unpacking Information Inequality. *op.cit*



Librarian A confidently showed awareness and/or application of critical race theory/other decolonial theory to themselves and to wider EDI library praxis. For example, Librarian A showed awareness of intersectional identities when they stated:

*“I think that people ... -grow up with this sense of superiority [...] at work it’s usually white middle class men who don’t like that coming from [me] a gay non-binary working-class person.*

Librarian A made it clear to me that their hybrid, intersectional identity of being ‘gay’, ‘nonbinary’ and working class has created an awareness of structural hegemonic privileges. Despite Librarian A being white themselves, Librarian A felt that their gender identity and sexuality differentiated them from leaders who got their position based on “their whiteness, their sexuality and their gender identity”. In my next chapter I will evaluate whether one’s identity and positionality can impact critical awareness.

Librarian A showed an understanding that there is a need for on-going commitment to anti-racism, self-development, stating:

*“It’s my responsibility as a librarian to learn, I shouldn’t be completely reliant on someone educating me you know, I’m an adult and I should be able to do that myself.”*

Librarian A told me the ways they educate themselves, including emphasising “reading books by people of colour, especially women of colour”. A desire to be educated by women from ethnic minorities demonstrates critical astuteness. As Hudson argues, in the wake of George Floyd’s death, ‘White Fragility’ by Robin Di Angelo became a bestseller.<sup>134</sup> However,

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<sup>134</sup> Hudson, D. (2020). *The Displays: On Anti-Racist Study and Institutional Study* op.cit

considering that people of colour have long been writing about the issues long before Angelo. it has been pointed out that her whiteness is what makes her palatable as an anti-racist speaker.<sup>135</sup> It would be rather counterintuitive if Librarian A prioritised books by “anti-racism educators who directly benefit from having white privilege [and are] paid exorbitant rates to help others dismantle their own privilege”<sup>136</sup> Librarian A's reading choices seemingly recognised this. By not perpetuating existing inequalities within publishing and/or societal tendencies to amplify white voices at the expense of non-white, I viewed Librarian A as exemplifying a good level of critical consciousness.

Librarian A did not simply “regurgitate theory from Black women to impress [me]”.<sup>137</sup> By consciously repeating that they wanted “*structures to be dismantled and rebuilt and re-designed in more inclusive way*”, it was clear that they recognised that] “reading books, no matter how diverse and radical, do nothing if they are not followed by tangible, material change”.<sup>138</sup>

Another Librarian who demonstrated critical awareness and/or application of critical race theory/other decolonial theory to themselves and to wider EDI library praxis was Librarian E. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Librarian E was the only librarian who demonstrated a critical, decolonial view of digital inequality. Their definition took into account interdisciplinary conceptualisation of digital inequality, as shown by them specifically mentioning “*potential democratisation of digital platforms as a way of learning and sharing social justice messages [and] organising activism*”. This is what scholars such as L. Nakamura

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<sup>135</sup> *ibid*

<sup>136</sup> *ibid* p.1

<sup>137</sup> Varsity. (2020). ‘The problem with statues, reading lists and what we call ‘activism’’. Available: <https://www.varsity.co.uk/opinion/19467> [Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2022]

<sup>138</sup> *ibid*

discuss and so confirm an awareness and interest in research done on digital media, race, gender and sexuality.<sup>139</sup>

Librarian E also showed consideration of performative allyship, stating: “*Boards [...] you know [they] say that [they’re] explicitly anti-racist [they have] stances like they’re trans-exclusive’ which is great but how much do you really understand what that means? How board members are appointed are great examples of how it’s not inclusive, how it’s not anti-racist [...]*”. This highlights once again the issue of corporate and/or institutional language that is largely based on “virtue signalling and woke positioning” and so is ineffective in creating change.<sup>140</sup> Such a sentiment echoes my questioning of RLUK’s manifesto and its bold claims it can create an equitable digital shift and combat digital poverty.

This need to question RLUK’s manifesto is strengthened by the fact that the three Associate Director/ Director equivalents, Librarians B, C and D were the librarians who showed the least developed levels of critical awareness. For example, when Librarian C was asked if they were aware of any links between structural inequality and digital inequality, they replied: “*The thing that comes straight to my mind are my parents and their inability to pay their gas bill... because it’s all online and actually they’re not poor... they’re retired..., they’re just poor in terms of their knowledge and understanding of the digital world*”. Although age is often associated with digital inequality, to give this as an example of digital inequality that was caused by structural inequalities is incorrect, especially when they emphasised that their parents were “not poor”

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<sup>139</sup> Nakamura, L (2020) *op.cit*

<sup>140</sup> Hudson, D. (2020). ‘*The Displays: On Anti-Racist Study and Institutional Study op.cit*

and so possessed economic and potential class privileges. Their parents white privilege was also unacknowledged..<sup>141</sup>

Librarian D similarly did not demonstrate an awareness of critical understanding. For example, Intersectionality was not mentioned when Librarian D stated that their government was becoming more inclusive because there “*are more women*”. Librarian D was from a UK devolved nation and a review of their government cabinet shows that their government only has ‘white’ women and not women from non-white backgrounds.<sup>142</sup> The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position, the fact that unlike ethnic minorities “white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm ‘ [the ordinary, the standard.] Other people are raced, we are just people””; is one of the key components of white privilege, structural racism and its perpetuation.<sup>143</sup>

Librarian B also displayed an under-developed awareness and/or application of critical race theory/ decolonial theory to self/digital inequality/wider library praxis. Due to their answer raising several significant tensions, their response is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

### **How critical change can be achieved within a neo-liberal structure like the university**

As addressed in my dissertation’s introduction, there is a philosophical quandary which has not been addressed by RLUK. This is how digital equity and equality can be made within the structure of an increasing commercial neo-liberal University. My line of thinking of how socio-economic and cultural structures reinforce digital inequality, derives from Black Marxist

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<sup>141</sup> Mubarak F, Suomi R. (2022) Elderly Forgotten? Digital Exclusion in the Information Age and the Rising Grey Digital Divide. *INQUIRY: The Journal of Health Care Organization, Provision, and Financing*. 59. doi:[10.1177/00469580221096272](https://doi.org/10.1177/00469580221096272) . [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>142</sup> UK Parliament. (2022). Devolved Parliament and Assemblies. Available: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/relations-with-other-institutions/devolved/> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

<sup>143</sup> Dyer, R. (1997). *White*. London: Routledge. (p.1)

conceptualisations which highlight that Racism is intrinsic to Capitalist social relations.<sup>144</sup> It is also inspired by S. Ahmed who talks extensively about the ways in which the neo-liberal models of university prevent barriers to equality.<sup>145</sup> I consequently wanted to examine if academic librarians had ever thought about the ways in which universities are negatively constrained by the broader socio-political power relations in which they are embedded.

Librarian B seemed to believe that libraries could be advocates for critical change if they “highlight institutionally and sectorally that digital inequality are everyday issues and without giving students the kind of equipment, capabilities and skills and infrastructure we are setting them up open for a world that expects a lot from them on those parts and actually we need to do more.”

This answer felt unsatisfactory, given the fact that for the past six years, the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) at the University of Cambridge has been researching digital exclusion.<sup>146</sup> Similarly, this year, the UK Government produced a ‘levelling up paper’ to tackle digital inequality and spoke about it last year at the House of Commons.<sup>147</sup> It is clearly a well-known fact that digital inequality is already ‘an everyday issue’ and that we need to combat it, hence the reason RLUK created a digital manifesto.

Librarian B also stated that libraries could act as “the connectors across the institution to bring the career service, the libraries, the skill services all together to start really thinking about the

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<sup>144</sup> Davis, A. (2020) ‘We can’t eradicate racism without eradicating racial capitalism’. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhh3CMkngkY> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2022]

<sup>145</sup> Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: racism and diversity in institutional life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>146</sup> University of Cambridge, Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research: (2016) Available: [https://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/Research/Start-Year/2017/building\\_better\\_opportunities\\_new\\_horizons? gl=1\\*16k9uhj\\* ga\\*MTIxNTA2ODIvLjE2NjM1MjAxNzU.\\* ga\\_P8Q1QT5W4K\\*MTY2MzUyMDE3NS4xLjEuMTY2MzUyMDQwOC4wLjAuMA](https://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/Research/Start-Year/2017/building_better_opportunities_new_horizons? gl=1*16k9uhj* ga*MTIxNTA2ODIvLjE2NjM1MjAxNzU.* ga_P8Q1QT5W4K*MTY2MzUyMDE3NS4xLjEuMTY2MzUyMDQwOC4wLjAuMA) [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> July 2022]

<sup>147</sup> Gov UK. (2022). *Levelling Up The United Kingdom*. Available: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1052708/Levelling\\_up\\_the\\_UK\\_white\\_paper.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052708/Levelling_up_the_UK_white_paper.pdf) <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2021-0175/> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> July 2022]

*digital futures of our students and their skills and their environments in that regard”. This would result in the library being able to provide physical infrastructure and skills infrastructure”.*

This answer clearly lies in a traditional view of digital inequality and so merely replicates the same conceptual limitations which my dissertation has been speaking about.

Librarian C suggested: *“It would be around creating a job role [where] it’s someone’s responsibility to talk about something ... so thinking about digital inequality if someone is responsible for that in their role then they will have the time as opposed to something that I need to think about”.*

Librarian C was aware though that creating a job role would involve looking at library recruitment processes. There was recognition that *“the process and the application form and the way we write our job descriptions a whole lot it does not invite people in”.* This is particularly the case for those from marginalised and minoritised communities. Researchers from Oxford Universities found that applicants with British sounding names were more often shortlisted for jobs.<sup>148</sup> if “universities really want to embrace diversity in regard to their academic staff, they have to look at their existing equal opportunities and monitoring data, recruitment strategies and the way that they interview applicants.<sup>149</sup> . I discuss this in more depth in my next chapter.

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<sup>148</sup> Centre for Social Investigation. (2019). ‘New CSI research reveals high levels of job discrimination faced by ethnic minorities in Britain’. Available: <http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/?p=1299> [Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2022]

<sup>149</sup> Doug. R. (2019). ‘Recruitment strategies are failing academics from ethnic minorities’. Available: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/recruitment-strategies-are-failing-academics-ethnic-minorities> [Accessed 15th August 2022]

Librarian C also raised another important issue of what type of university is more likely to be able to enact change. They stated:

*“I think the Post-92s are in a better place... better organised... some of them may struggle with budgets but they’re really astute they’ve worked with business...there’s just something much more fluid with the post 92s... Russel groups are just dinosaurs...dinosaurs with money [so] I think the type of work you are talking about you would get at the post-92s [and] those London universities that need to deal with diverse populations have probably got it going on so much better...”*

### **Barriers to critical change being achieved in a neo-liberal structure like the university**

Given Librarians A and D’s viewpoints on critical awareness, their responses echoed critical lines of thinking that equity cannot be created within the current social structures.<sup>150</sup>

Librarian A explicitly stated *“we need a new structure that is not neoliberal”*.

Librarian E gave a reason why neoliberal structures prevent change: *“in the same way that university neo liberal structures [need money] [...] we need more money from private individuals”*.

Librarian E viewed the ways in which *“we choose to work with those relationship partnerships, setting boundaries of those relationships”* needed sector development, as these partnerships may be with bodies with unethical values. For example, UK Universities receive higher education funding from the same UK government which produced a report last year that was

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<sup>150</sup> Davis, A.(2020) op.cit ; Gillborn, D et.al (2020). op.cit

condemned by the UN for the way it “further distorted and falsified historic facts, and could even fuel racism, racial discrimination and negative racial stereotypes”.<sup>151</sup> How can universities truly create equitable change when they are directly situated and benefit from such partnerships? This is a discussion which more RLUK librarians need to engage in .

Librarian A also stated that a further key barrier to creating change was politics of leadership within high education. *“I also really see it in universities particularly at [mine] that control is held by a very small number of people”*.

Power being disproportionately held by a small number of people is a facet of life globally. Within university, this issue can be compounded. Shekhawat, K discovered that “connections, referrals, bureaucracy, political involvement, similar family names play a huge part in university recruitment”.<sup>152</sup> Whilst the findings were from an Indian context, Librarian A implied that unethical values such as favouritism are also found within their institution. Librarian A stated:

*“From my experience at working at a university it’s generally someone knows [the right person]... I’ve been in some groups and there are people there where it’s not their area of work but they’ve simply been invited because they’re friends with the chair and that just perpetuates inequality”*.

Librarian A therefore believed that this prevented change from being created, especially as most of the identities within higher leadership were white cisgender and straight. The

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<sup>151</sup> United Nations. (2021). ‘United Kingdom: UN experts condemn “reprehensible racism report”’. Available: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/04/united-kingdom-un-experts-condemn-reprehensible-racism-report> [Accessed 15th June 2022]

<sup>152</sup> Shekhawat, K.. (2019). Nepotism, Favoritism and Cronyism in faculty hiring among institutions providing higher education. South-East Asian Journal of Medical Education. 13. 53 (p.1). Available: <https://seajme.sljol.info/articles/abstract/10.4038/seajme.v13i1.63/> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]



overrepresentation of hegemonic “*mainstream identities*” on boards was also stated by Librarian E.

This lack of representation raises an important question: “How much of a vested interest can someone have in deconstructing systems that they directly profit from?”<sup>153</sup> Librarian A firmly believed that “*as long as the people who are benefiting from the structure at the top [because] if they benefit from it they are probably not going to change*”

Librarian A was able to defend this strong statement by providing examples of how the presence of hegemonic identities can prevent the type of EDI change which digital inequality falls into. They pointed to their experience of dealing with (white) fragility :

*“I’ve often found and met people who are transphobic and racist [and] if you try to call out the individual they just see it as an attack ... [but] sometimes people need to be called out and rightly so”.*

Although the response provided by Librarian C did not consider the broader socio-political power relations that universities are in, they also demonstrated the presence of internal power structures that could prevent digital equitable change being made. Librarian C believed academic libraries were actually often powerless to enforce substantial change due to the structure of universities, stating:

*“The position of libraries [is] in between professional services and academic services... I just think that there’s so many different power bases in a university. You have this helix of power,*

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<sup>153</sup> Hudson, D. (2020). ‘*The Displays: On Anti-Racist Study and Institutional Study op.cit.* p.1

*[...] there's so many power bases that nothing moves, there's no agility! We do care... [but] the structures stop us being agile and responding quickly... [...]*

The fact the librarian C explicitly stated that *“the people in the organisation really want change and they really want to be able to enact change but it’s just sh\*\*. You know ... vice chancellors want to but can’t do anything long term... it’s a mess.”* confirms radical digital change may be impossible in our current structures.

Librarian B also provided significant reasons for why powerful institutional change can be unachievable in universities. Librarian B highlighted the realities of:

*“Different institutions being at “different stages of the discussion of equality and diversity”.*

This parallels Librarian C’s statement about the difference of feasibility of creating equitable change between Russell Group Universities and ‘Post 92’s’. This needs to be acknowledged by RLUK.

Librarian B also raised an important point of how: *“Some [universities] will centralise that [and] will say ok we want a policy and strategy that [determines] the actions of [all] departments and all services take and that has its advantages where you know there is an institutional strategy. [However, it also has disadvantages – it [can be] just one more strategy that nobody is going to really adopt, or no one will really embed structurally and systematically”.*

I found this latter part of the statement especially significant because it reminded me of the discrepancies between Librarian A and Librarian C regarding digital policies. Their different

answers showed that policies can be in place, but they may be knowingly and/or unknowingly not enforced by staff members. More significantly, and within the context of my study in particular, this answer also reminded me how the argument and recommendations I make could unfortunately be ignored by RLUK librarians, especially if Vocational Awe and/or Fragility, which I defined on page 8, causes defensiveness and rejection towards this study.<sup>154</sup>

The findings for this code (Critical Awareness) suggest the existence of multiple struggles academic librarians will face in creating equitable digital change which are not accounted for by RLUK's manifesto.<sup>155</sup> The findings from my other code (Definitions) also highlight further difficulties. There is a lack of digital inequality policies which provide transparent frameworks for creating digital change. There is also the potential for librarians to hold outdated definitions of digital inequality, as well as a lack of critical awareness, which will obscure the critical decolonial changes needed to create meaningful equitable change.

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<sup>154</sup> Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves. *op.cit*

<sup>155</sup> RLUK (no date) Digital shift *op.cit*

## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION**

Although this is a small study, it is significant that only one librarian in my sample gave a Decolonial and/or revisionist definition of digital inequality. In principle, this confirms the findings from my literature review that the unequitable tensions within Technology are problematically overlooked and/or not understood by academic librarians. The majority of librarians I interviewed were not influenced by interdisciplinary studies that focus on internet experiences, and so these did not immediately come into their minds when they were asked to define digital inequality. It is understandable why librarians hold outdated definitions of digital inequality. As academic institutions invested in academic learning that is defined by universities, the traditional definition reflects a ‘natural’ focus on the ability for students to be able to do their university studies from home. Being guided by university learning is why many academic libraries also continue to define digital divides or digital poverty in terms of digital skills. Similarly, Librarian C stated, “*In the last 2 years it has been knee jerk [reactions] coming out of the pandemic*”. This may also be why traditional definitions of digital inequality are commonly held in contrast to definitions that are more thoughtful and reflect longer-term strategic and structural changes. Academic libraries who follow their institution’s mission to spread knowledge and give graduates the skills they will need for employment may think they have no power to change larger structural issues and that giving laptops is the only tangible solution libraries can enforce. Although as Critical Librarian, I disagree with Catherine Miller who argues we should not ask librarians to solve a structural problem, as if librarians hold no power in their everyday choices, I can understand why such views exist.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> CILIP. (2020) ‘Do Librarians have a role at the cutting edge of tech ethics’. Available: <https://www.cilip.org.uk/news/521305/Do-libraries-have-a-role-at-the-cutting-edge-of-tech-ethics.htm>: [Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> June 2022].

Another reason why the librarians I interviewed had trouble defining digital inequality could be attributed to the absence of a formal, or easily accessible, digital inequality policy in their organisations to guide librarians' theorisation. These findings build on the existing evidence I discussed in my literature review, regarding the trouble I had in finding a digital policy which had a clear or fixed definition of digital inequality. They also highlight a new dimension to my research objectives of once again questioning how RLUK 'can combat digital inequality and ensure an equitable digital shift'. As highlighted in Chapter 5 above, many of the librarians who belong to RLUK were unable to meaningfully define digital inequality because their institution does not have a formal or explicit digital inequality policy. What is more, the lack of digital inequality policies also implied that digital inequality is not a key policy goal or priority for their home library. This again questions RLUK's ability to create equitable change if libraries who belong to RLUK are not even focussing on the issue of digital inequality or are unsure how to respond to it due to the lack of an accessible and/or established digital inequality policy. As Librarian B pointed out "*if you want change to happen systemically then it needs to be governed by a framework that is defining what it means to have digital inequalities or digital poverty.*"

As libraries continue to stabilise in a post-pandemic world, better defined and more accessible digital policies, specifically focussing on a broader understanding of digital inequality, clearly need to be created. However, my findings imply that even if a digital policy is created, and digital inequality is formally defined in an academic library, then this will most likely arise from hegemonic viewpoints of white, cisgender and heteronormative identities. All my respondents confirmed that the person who creates definitions matters; the person needs an understanding digital inequality and it needs to reflect wide perspectives. Yet, the lack of adequate minority representation on university boards which was frequently discussed by my

respondents has implications for the extent to which equitable digital change can be created. *As asked by Librarian E, Even if boards “say that [they’re] explicitly anti-racist [they have] stances like they’re trans-exclusive how much do you really understand what that means? It was significant that the Directors and Associate Director equivalents showed the least developed critical awareness. Given my study’s small sample and the limited research that examines White higher education leaders’ perspectives on race, racism and anti-racist leadership effort, this is an issue academic institutions and bodies like RLUK investigate into further, especially if they are trying to introduce policies that promote equity.*<sup>157</sup>

This is not to say that white hegemonic identities cannot be on these boards. There needs to be the presence of individuals with critical consciousness. This is why simply adding in different multicultural perspectives is also not the solution. My findings show interesting nuances between one’s identity and positionality and how that impacts critical awareness towards digital inequality,

Of the three white librarians I interviewed (Librarians A, C and E), two did not mention intersectionality or outwardly show other signs of critical engagement and/or deep critical consciousness through their language usage. A likely reason for this is the fact that a key component of ‘white privilege’ is the lack of need for white people to think about and understand critical issues and topics because they are structurally and socially unaffected by them. Yet Librarian A did, which shows that white people can possess critical awareness, especially if they have intersectional white identities which combine to create overlapping modes of discrimination and privilege simultaneously. As mentioned, Librarian A stated that

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<sup>157</sup> Vatt-Young, D. & Bryson, B. (2021) White Higher Education Leaders on the Complexities of Whiteness and Anti-Racist Leadership. *Journal committed to social change on race and ethnicity*. 7 (1), 46–82. (P.1). Available: <https://journals.shareok.org/jcscscore/article/view/142> . [Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> July 2022]

their hybrid identity and experiences as a white non-binary queer, working-class librarian made them more aware of the role of hegemony in library practices. This is not to say that all marginalised communities will share a ‘sense of connection’. Although there can be a sense of solidarity, this does not necessarily mean similarity, especially when intersectional differences within these communities exist and other forms of oppression can be enacted within marginalised groups. For example, there can be a strong presence of anti-Blackness in other communities such as South Asian community due to the influence of colourism and the caste system in South Asia.<sup>158</sup> Kinouani highlights that the experiences of racial trauma can mean that some marginalised groups actually: accept the status quo, identify with (white) aggressors, display intra-group conflicts, “scapegoat transgressors, e.g., those who don’t toe the ‘white line’, enact other forms of oppression, e.g., ablism and homophobia and adopt ‘respectability/assimilative politics’ where reproduction of historical relational models such as subservience are maintained.<sup>159</sup>

However, when thinking of the type of person who is in charge of creating definitions and promoting equity-based change, those with hybrid identities can certainly offer a wider perspective based on their multiple experience. Often EDI measures segment groups based on just one element of their identity to promote diversity, such as their ‘race’, ‘gender’ or ‘sexuality’ alone, without addressing the experience of hybrid, intersectional identities.<sup>160</sup> Despite my small sample size, my findings add credibility for my assertion that a digital policy needs to be a critical decolonial policy, which takes into account inequalities which arise from such hybrid intersectional identities.

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<sup>158</sup> BBC. (2020). *South Asian anti-black racism: ‘we don’t marry black people’*. Available: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/newsbeat-53395935> [Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> July 2022]

<sup>159</sup> Kinouani, G. (2021). *Living While Black The Essential guide to overcoming racial trauma*. London: Ebury. (p.40)

<sup>160</sup> Agosto, V., & Roland, E. (2018). Intersectionality and Educational Leadership: A Critical Review. *Review of Research in Education*, 42(1), 255–285. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18762433>. [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2022]

Librarians B and E were from ethnic minority backgrounds. Whilst Librarian E showed evidence of critical awareness in their answers. Librarian B did not. For example, Librarian B shared this view that in regard to diversity:

*“we need to take health approach towards [in that] it is everyone’s responsibility and not one of 2 people [...] in the same way health is everyone’s responsibility people take care of their health and other people’s health we need to take care of our own diversity and others diversity as well and inclusion in that concept”.*

This is a colour-blind approach which fails to acknowledge that White leaders hold power, both racial and positional and so these are the people “who should be doing the heavy lifting in the pursuit of racial equity in higher education”<sup>161</sup> It is not marginalised communities’ responsibility to be forced to pursue emotional labour of trying to enact change. Often it is not possible, especially when they will face the most resistance due to their lack of societal privileges.<sup>162</sup>

During my interview, Librarian B also seemed to make automatic assumptions about which marginalised community will most likely suffer from inequality:

*“I can pretty much almost guess what type of students but that would pretty much be an informed assumption rather than evidence backed up by research {...} in terms of demographics these issues would be more common with students with either from lower socio-economic background or black and minority ethnic background.”*

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<sup>161</sup> Vatt-Young, D. & Bryson, B. (2021) White Higher Education Leaders on the Complexities of Whiteness. *op.cit* (p.1)

<sup>162</sup> Clark, I. (2018). *op.cit*



As highlighted in my literature review, Haiden and Bawden already discuss why preconceived ideas about the ‘information and/or digital poor’, made through the lens of middle-class librarianship is an issue that was already highlighted in my literature review<sup>163</sup> Whilst there is indeed evidence that these marginalised groups can suffer the most from digital poverty, blanket assertions can result in a deficit model positioning of a community and can lead to further negative stereotyping.<sup>164</sup> As mentioned in my literature review, Gibson reminds us that we must emphasise that it is not a community who suffers from a problem but rather, wider structures which create the problem for the community.<sup>165</sup> Preconceived assumptions about BIPOC communities without localised evidence can also act as two-faced Janus definitions. It erases the global, innovative inventions that BIPOC communities have made to the technological industrial spheres. These include Gladys West who contributed to the development of GPS (Global positioning system), Mark Dean who played a key part in the development of the colour computer monitor and the first gigahertz chip and many more.<sup>166</sup>

Whilst this analysis of Librarian B is based on one conversation, these responses do convey that BIPOC communities will not always apply critical frameworks, which matter when it comes to creating equitable change within spheres such as the digital. This is why Tokenism on boards needs to be avoided. Only those who display regular evidence of critical awareness are suitable for defining equitable change.

Finally, my findings lend support to my questioning of how equitable digital change can be created within the rigid structures which academic libraries operate within. Amidst Librarian

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<sup>163</sup> Haider, J. & Bawden, D. (2007). Conceptions of ‘information poverty’ *op.cit*

<sup>164</sup> Gibson, A. N. & Martin, J. D. (2019.) Re-situating information poverty. *op.cit*

<sup>165</sup> *ibid*

<sup>166</sup> <sup>166</sup> Childnet. (2020). Black inventors and pioneers who have influenced the way we use the internet and technology today. Available: [https://www.childnet.com/blog/black-inventors-and-pioneers-who-have-influenced-the-way-we-use-the-internet-and-technology-today/#:~:text=These%20include%20the%20touch%20tone.and%20the%20fiber%20optic%20cable.&text=Gladys%20West%20is%20a%20mathematician.GPS%20\(Global%20positioning%20system\)](https://www.childnet.com/blog/black-inventors-and-pioneers-who-have-influenced-the-way-we-use-the-internet-and-technology-today/#:~:text=These%20include%20the%20touch%20tone.and%20the%20fiber%20optic%20cable.&text=Gladys%20West%20is%20a%20mathematician.GPS%20(Global%20positioning%20system).). [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022]

C's claims that "*vice chancellors want to [change] but can't do anything long term*", there is consequently a need to be intentionally mindful of what changes to digital equality can realistically be achieved in practice by RLUK librarians who are working within rigid structures. Librarian C's suggestion that the rigid structures of Russell group universities render them as institutions that will find it the hardest to enact change is an extremely significant finding. It makes my dissertation's questioning of RLUK's ability to truly create the changes they espouse in the digital sphere even more valid. Out of the 36 libraries that belong to RLUK, nearly 60% are Russell Group Universities libraries.<sup>167</sup> Considering the fact that University of West London is the only academic library I am aware of that has embedded criticality into their policy-making adds further validation to Librarian C's views.<sup>168</sup>

Although Librarian C gave good suggestions for how equitable change could be created, implying a decolonial digital inequality job role could be made, the underlying problems of organisational culture and its structures would still need to be looked at. For instance, changes would have to be made not only to recruitment biases; but biases within employee progression, performance management, and pay and promotion also matter. Such measures take time, money, commitment and, as Librarian C emphasised, flexible power bases which are most commonly found in post-92 universities. As Librarian B also pointed out, there is also no promise that recommendations or policies created in this new job role (e.g., decolonial digital inequality) would be followed though. It may simply be "*one more strategy that nobody is going to really adopt, or no one will really embed structurally and systematically*". There needs to be a real commitment and desire to actively enforce equitable change, rather than corporate and/or institutional language that is largely based on "virtue signalling and woke

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<sup>167</sup> <https://www.rluk.ac.uk/members/>

<sup>168</sup> University of West London. (2022). *Library Services Strategy 2018-2023*. Available: <https://www.uwl.ac.uk/current-students/library/library-policies-and-regulations/library-services-strategy-2018-2023> [Accessed 25th July 2022]

positioning”.<sup>169</sup> I already asked in my findings “how much of a vested interest can someone have in deconstructing systems that they directly profit from?”<sup>170</sup> The librarians I interviewed were certainly in favour of some form of digital change. Despite my critiques of Librarians B and C showing a lack of critical awareness, these librarians in particular did admit they needed to learn more and I am sure their desire was genuine. Further studies into whether those at the top of these academic, neoliberal structures mirror the same willingness need to be done, in order to complement this study and provide the ultimate confirmation that RLUK really can combat digital inequality and create equitable change in reality.

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<sup>169</sup> Hudson, D. (2020). *op.cit*

<sup>170</sup> *ibid*

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.**

In 2020 Research Libraries UK (RLUK) launched their Manifesto to try to “combat digital poverty and ensuring an equitable digital shift”. However, my dissertation has theoretically and materially conveyed why this aspiration would currently be difficult for RLUK to realise in practice.

Although I faced limitations of a small sample size, key themes which may be considered indicative of larger trends were found by my study.

Firstly, the definition of digital divide currently used and understood by RLUK member librarians needs to be widened for meaningful change to be created in the digital sector. This is not because I dismiss focussing on digital device provision or digital skill as inappropriate or ineffective. The majority of librarian respondents who I interviewed only recognise a lack of access, or a lack digital skills, as digital inequality . However, as shown by my literature review, this definition needs to be updated to reflect the reality that there are multiple digital inequalities that will affect intersectional marginalised communities.

A lack of awareness about multifaceted digital inequalities may be because there is a lack of LIS scholarship about how aspects of the Technosphere have been shown to both reflect structural inequalities and so cause and entrench digital inequalities.

A lack of awareness around multifaceted digital inequalities may also be caused by the lack of a formal digital inequality policy that defines digital inequality and provides an easily

accessible framework for librarians to guide their practice. My own difficulties of finding a digital policy were mirrored by my interview respondents which is why I believe it is valid to state this is a general issue. Therefore, I recommend that academic libraries should formally define digital inequality. The definition should ideally be an intersectional approach and consider broader interdisciplinary scholarship and, more importantly, include critical theories such as CRT.

Indeed, the creation of a critical decolonial policy was my dissertation's second central argument and another of my recommendations. My dissertation argues it would be difficult for RLUK to create equitable and meaningful change in the digital sector unless their policy was (critical) decolonial policy.

Through my literature review and analysis of findings, I showed that there needs to be an awareness of how materiality of power is reproduced through technology, our assumptions, and library practices. There also needs to be particular emphasis on intersectionality which would consider the heterogeneous experiences of minoritised and marginalised communities. My methodology and theoretical framework chapters also conveyed why CRT is suitable for heterogeneous academic library settings and for promoting equity-based EDI library work in particular.

The librarians who were Associate Director/ Director equivalents were the ones who displayed gaps in critical awareness. This findings aligned with a perception amongst my other participants that there is a lack of minoritised representation and/or critical awareness possession among the senior people who make policy decisions on digital inequality and related issues. Once again these issues would need to be investigated in further detail in order

to ascertain whether my findings do confirm larger issues within academic librarianship. However, this potential general lack of librarian criticality raises a number of recommendations about the need for and content of future education which transcend Tokenistic gestures. If we are serious about creating equitable technologies and equitable digital shifts, then we need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of what technology is, re-examine our technological assumptions (epistemology), by understanding the Eurocentric origins of technology (ontology) and the Eurocentric goals of technology (teleology). Therefore, I recommend for our sector to prioritise and actively encourage the on-going development of critical awareness training for their staff especially amongst senior leaders. There is also a need to inclusively attract, recruit and retain people who show active commitment to critical awareness who can apply it to areas such as digital inequality. All librarians must be committed to developing and prioritising critical awareness to effectively dismantle digital inequality.

Critical awareness training as more than bias training which, is shown to be short-lived.<sup>171</sup> Effective critical training would need to view hegemonic power in our sector as extensions of, rather than separate from, the systems of inequality that characterise society more broadly. Another recommendation is for Academic Library Services to take advantage of their proximity to University Social Science departments and its resources. As aptly stated in my introduction “as sites of knowledge production, radical innovation and deep expertism, universities are the ideal location for radical transformation due to the pool of talent amongst academic staff.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Smith, N. ‘How Effective are Academic Libraries’ attempts at dismantling Racism’. op.cit

<sup>172</sup> Czernowitz L. (2022). ‘Multi-layered digital inequalities in HEIs’ op.cit

As I insisted throughout this study, current structural inequalities and current social and academic structures can create barriers for creating equitable change in spheres such as the digital. Therefore, I recommend for more writing and research on how to discuss difficult topics relating to race and wider issues regarding equity, which digital inequality falls into. This is especially needed considering my dissertation touched on uncomfortable subjects of whether unethical values embedded not just within Technology, but also within the Higher Education Sector, create barriers for equitable digital changes. It raised philosophical questions of whether calls for equitable digital shifts were performative language rather than a true desire. It could be much easier for librarians to discuss these uncomfortable issues if they were part of larger conversations and movements which transcend librarianship and which support dismantling structural inequalities in other contexts.

Nevertheless, I hope RLUK academic librarians and other faculty staff realise that despite the challenges, and notwithstanding the small sample size used in my study, my findings provide a useful contribution to how to tackle digital inequality meaningfully. My study opens a clear and fruitful pathway for further investigation to better understand the barriers to equitable digital change and devise an effective policy response to begin to create meaningful and equitable digital change for our marginalised and minoritized patrons. Like the title of my works says; if RLUK academic librarians agree that digital strategies are in need of a (critical) decolonising process, powerful institutional change can occur, despite the intersection of education and technology with unethical values.

## **LIST OF FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS**

There are several further recommendations which flow from the findings from this research project. To promote action and ease of implementation, these are grouped under two categories, namely: (i) Recommendations for UK Academic Libraries, and (ii) Recommendations for further research

### **Recommendations for UK Academic Libraries**

Recommendation 1 – A critical decolonial digital poverty should be written by an array of intersectional stakeholders who display proof of critical awareness and who are representative of the people they are trying to help for it to be inclusive. Tokenism must be avoided. As my study has shown, there can be a lack of critical awareness even amongst BIPOC communities. This policy should be freely available and suitable for neuroatypical learners.

Recommendation 2 – Before the policy is written, libraries should formally investigate what type of students suffer from digital inequality, and the different forms this take. This would mean that any policy recommendations can be based on evidence rather than stereotypical assumptions. A large sample size should be analysed using CRT and/or other decolonial methodologies in order to consider how wider social structures impact digital inequalities are experienced by communities, as well as consideration of less traditional definitions of digital inequality.

Recommendation 3 - Our sector should consider creating more digital inequality job



roles that specifically focus on digital issues through a decolonial lens. If this is not feasible financially or strategically, librarians should be encouraged to develop into Critical Librarians who can apply Critical Praxis to multiple areas within Librarianship, including digital inequality and who are aware of larger conversations, movements and theories that address inequality in other contexts.

### **Recommendations for further research on this topic**

The following recommendations are aimed at stimulating more research on this rather undeveloped topic.

Recommendation 4- A large sample size of Russell group and non-Russell librarians should be interviewed in order to test their critical awareness and to enquire into their personal and institutional definitions of digital inequality. This needs to include senior leadership.

Recommendation 5 - LIS researchers should be encouraged and incentivised to research the links between Technology and hegemonic power because, as stated in my literature review, this is a relatively under-theorised and ahistorical area of Librarianship.

Recommendation 6 - A 'Critical Digital Librarianship' discipline should be developed by Critical Librarians where Critical Librarianship is not studied in isolation from Technology. This would raise awareness of digital inequality and hopefully cause issues of Hegemonic structural power within Technology to be recognised and developed more by LIS.

It is my conviction that if RLUK and other policymakers in the LIS sector were to adopt these recommendations and commit to their implementation, RLUK's vision to "combat

digital poverty and ensuring an equitable digital shift” would have a real chance to become a reality. In its current form, there is a risk that it will amount to a hollow promise or a mere soundbite.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Questions**

Here are my Interview questions (Asterisks are next to the questions I had time to ask)

1. \* What is your personal definition of digital inequality ? –
2. \* How did you come up with this definition?
3. Has it changed over time?
4. \* What is your university library's definition of digital inequality ?
5. \* Do you know how the library came up with this?
6. \* Were there many discussions about how to define digital inequality?
7. \* Who was involved in the creation of this definition?
8. \* Do you think it matters who picks definitions?
9. Do you think the definition needs updating post COVID?
10. Digital inequality - Did your university ever research into what type of student suffers the most from digital poverty ?
11. When it comes to digital inequality, did your library notice that there is a connection between race and ethnicity?
12. \* What is your library doing to try and end digital inequality?
13. What could/should libraries be doing to end digital inequality?
14. Are you aware of your library using critical frameworks in their response to digital inequality?
15. \* We have been talking about digital inequality and it is clear that there are many structural issues related to digital inequality, do you think librarians can create this change?
16. \* Some people say this is hard to do within the neoliberal framework, what do you think?

### **Example of a participant transcript**

Interviewer: Thank you for coming. I initially thought that to have an ice breaker you know before we start chatting ... so I'm interested to know as a child what did you want to be when you grow up?

#### ***Ice breaker chat***

Interviewer: That's really interesting you've always liked libraries and um talking about libraries that actually starts off my first question because you say you work at University of

{[x]} I'm just very interested to know about how they see digital inequality I mean do you know how does your library define digital inequality?

Librarian A: So I've been having a look to find things that would help me as an employee you know as the library focusing on digital inequality and what does that actually mean and I haven't been able to come to find any policy. I can't find it, either that's because I can't find it or its not accessible and it exists somewhere but I think that's the starting point is like I would have loved to have been able to talk about one but then if there isn't one that's like an are we actually talking about these things that are actually really important?

Interviewer: What you said is so interesting because I've found the same thing as you...I've been looking for the digital policies in libraries I can't find it .... It's very hard to find free accessible policies on the Internet you know?

Librarian A: I mean there's... I know that there are policies and I've had a look at them about digital preservation and things round that and I was having a look at those but nothing mentions like digital inequality.... the focus is on the digitalisation itself whether it's a book or an article or archives and yeah it's important to preserve them but we also need a user I think we need to user centred approach about how do people use them how do people access them can they access them in the same way, What policies are there for people but it seems to be like most library policies focus on the actual collections and the content itself rather than the people who use them and I find that even with archival polices. I also went to look for the RLUK policy I think it's the digital inequality policy and I couldn't find that one either I mean the RLUK website was very helpful but it was just a complete overload I think that's one of the issues is the librarian staff need to be aware of policies but also need to access them and they should

also be accessible to the public for the users but that's one of the issues because that allows me to do my own learning it's my responsibility as a librarian to learn. I shouldn't be you know completely reliant on someone educating me you know I'm an adult and I should be able to do that myself but if things aren't accessible and I can't seem to find anywhere where we've talked about digital inequalities and I know they exist I'm sure they exist which made me think .... But I think [someone from my university] is a member of RLUK and I notice that a librarian [from my university] sits on one of their committees there must be something here... we must have fallen into that proxy but I can't seem to see the link between two or any type of relationship.

Interviewer: That's really interesting what you said about you looking to educate yourself as a librarian that brings him to my next question of what is your personal definition of digital inequality?

Librarian A: I have probably little knowledge of digital inequality I work in the library part time but I also work in equality diversity and inclusion at the university as well ,LGBT inclusion, so I do that as a separate job but digital inequality I always think of accessibility. I think of accessibility in two ways where there is a move to digital platforms, there seems to be no consideration that people can't ... don't have the infrastructure to access things and that creates inequality.

Interviewer: and when you say infrastructure can you define what you mean by infrastructure?

Librarian A: You know people having access to a laptop or a tablet or other apps you need to access like digital content also you know Internet connexion many rural people don't have

Internet Connexions or many people can't afford to have Internet or fast Internet so I think you know infrastructure of it like having the technology needed to access things. But I think the inequality also comes from our assumptions and our mindsets often about the digital world it's almost like a lot of people think it's a given that certain people like young people particularly know what to do with technology ... those assumptions by librarians thinking Oh yeah you know our new cohort of undergrads they were all born ... trying to do maths.. in 2004 and assuming they will just know how to access like online articles and books.

Digital inequalities... I think there is digital inequality in terms of library content in general ... you know it has been shaped by the past in theory and in practice and creates an inequality in terms of lack of diversity of voices in digital collections... so like the move for [my university's] decolonisation of its collections. It's really important because a lot of resources need to be provided that are a lot more diverse or racially diverse in digital and in print I'm sure there's a whole lot more I don't understand and that's why it would be helpful to have those policies so I can look and also to see how my university frames it because different areas and industries may frame digital inequality differently.

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely, I mean that's kind of what my dissertation is doing in the sense of so I'm arguing how the definition ... most libraries from what I can gather and based on the library I work at - it defines digital inequality of lack of access to devices have access to the Internet but for me personally I'm very influenced by a lot of different critical thoughts and I'm very influenced by digital humanities that look at I don't know if you've heard Sophiya Noble? she looks at how for instance algorithms are biased especially towards marginalised and minoritized communities and identities so for me when I think of digital inequalities I just

think of how some people like is it they just face so ... their experience on the Internet is so different compared to someone from a more privilege position ... so I'm I guess my dissertation is arguing for like more holistic and inclusive definition.

Librarian A; Yeah, yeah I think that's definitely true I certainly see that in terms of how algorithms work in terms of my own identity in terms of my own sexuality being married to a man and sometimes you will see adverts around LGBT on like Facebook and things like that but then there are some adverts which are very heteronormative and assume I'm married therefore I'm married to someone of the opposite sex and I'm just like hmm algorithm isn't working very well .... yeah I would agree with that cause the algorithm is designed by a person with their own bias and so someone may have that assumption of a people then we're just basically taking all the human bias and put it into like these algorithms and AI and we are just replicating inequalities in the digital world.

Interviewer: Yeah it's that potential space to experiences different forms of discrimination on the internet whether it's unconscious biases or whether it's only go to like a YouTube page and you see like racist or homophobic comments is like it's all that on the Internet that I... I guess I'm asking this question in my dissertation but it's like if libraries really want care for their patrons and make a meaningful difference - I'm not saying that like giving students the laptops and giving them like hotspots isn't making a difference- but I think especially from like an EDI angle is really kind of tackling these issues ...you have to tackle the structural inequalities that are behind the digital inequalities.

Librarian A: Yeah and you know libraries need to do that as well, a lot of libraries can no longer sit back and think OK our job is just to help people find knowledge and just look after

the books you know... we need to.... I think libraries have changed but there is still most certainly a mentality of 'we are the guardians of information and we decide who gets it and who doesn't and I think that mentality still exists and I don't think that's libraries are about' that's part of it making sure there are resources available but not making that it so patriarchal in a way ... that's probably not the right term but that idea like you know we're not the protectors of knowledge like people should be able to access it you know they shouldn't have any criteria to access that's why I'm also very supportive of like academic institutions be open to the public as well members of public outside of academic institution to have access to information because that's another inequality with libraries and I think academia and academic publishing is so expensive to buy a lot of these books and journals ( and even people who teach the university or who do research or study can't even afford it's so inaccessible and I think you can create almost an inequality there between those who can afford it and those who can't afford it , but also those who access the university library versus those who can't and yeah it's not great for modern libraries I think everyone should be Open Access anyway ... I think libraries ...yeah they need to recognise that they are reinforcing those human biases that were finding in those algorithms.

Interviewer: Yeah so how do you think libraries could solve structural quality?

I know that's quite a big question but like I'm just interested in just your personal thoughts like based on your experience?

Librarian A: I think talking about it and acknowledging it is a good start ... from an EDI perspective trying to get ppl to acknowledge things and change things I've often found and met people who are transphobic and racist and trying to fight against those things, if you try to call out the individual they just see it as an attack and sometimes people need to be called

out and rightly so ... trying to explain that you know this is something that these structures have been built over such a long time, but if structures can be built so they can be unbuilt but you need to people I think there are lots of us who want to structures to be dismantled and rebuilt and re designed in more inclusive way but the people who enable us to do that are the people who pay probably less attention to because they see it as an attack on their positions. These are issues I have in my EDI job. It's sad that I have to actually demand that people do something about the transphobia and institutional racism it's like ... sometimes I think why are you so afraid and the conclusion or all that I can come with this that the majority of people in the room who get to make these decisions tend to be white heterosexual men who are seeing... who are seeing their positions being attacked. If you actually get rid of those inequalities I suppose everyone will probably realise that they're going to have to ... they may not get their position back because many a times they got that position based upon their whiteness or their sexuality or their gender identity ... but it's also about superiority um and sadly we lives in a society where people still think they are superior to other people whether it be around race or ethnicity .. I think heterosexuality and homosexuality I think there's still this idea that is underpinned by British class system where there's levels of superiority and yeah that's my struggle trying to get the people who can make the changes people who also have control over budget and money trying to get them to make changes.

Interviewer: That's interesting .. it's like dismantling power is also obviously the dismantling personal powers.

Librarian A: Yeah exactly ... to be told: sorry the reality is actually that you're not superior I think that people ... people grow up with this sense of superiority I think often yeah trying to tell you see my case at work its usually white middle class men who don't like that coming



from a gay non-binary working class person but I think you know looking at the RLUK, I was just looking... I think they have like the committee and you know ... I know a librarian from my university is on at least one of the committee but it's like to get rid of the structural inequalities how can we ensure that we are in committees that are being selected and it's not just about.... like a nod that I know someone? There needs to be things in place to say we need this to be diverse, particularly racial diversity and other forms of diversity because ultimately some of the reason we have continued to do the same thing is because of the same people with the same personalities on there. One of the things in like inclusive recruitment is like not to.. if you're on a panel for an interview interviewing someone, don't think they're good for the job because they remind you of someone you liked in the previous job, cause you are just gunna perpetuate the same thing over and over again and if you don't have diversity on decision-making bodies how can things ever change? It's going to be similar people who probably have similar life experiences. They know other people have certain experiences but they haven't experienced it themselves and don't know... they end up with their own biases and that plays into policy because they don't consult wider with people.... when you write policies no matter what they're for it's about involving people .... if you put in a room; if you selected people from a certain generation you probably get the same views of what libraries should be, it's not going to be opened up.... but yeah its dismantling everything that has already been built ... it's about moving out and thinking of others beyond your own scope which many people are unable to do – it's a people thing, moving beyond ego.

Interviewer: this is my next question everything that we've just been discussing in terms of the people making the decisions the type of people making the decisions like obviously universities are operating in a very kind of neoliberal structure so do you think within that

neoliberal structure change, this special kind of this social justice change that we're talking about can even be created you think in the existing neoliberal structure ?

Librarian A: That's a tough one... probably not long as the people who are benefiting from the structure at the top.

Interviewer: That's a very interesting answer.

Librarian A: If they benefit from it they are probably not going to change... therefore we need a new structure that is not neoliberal ...yeah only over the past few years have I seen that the biggest thing playing out at universities particularly within management is other people's personalities. That has a huge part of in what happens at university I also really see it in universities particular at [my uni] that control is held by a very small amount of people who get to make decisions and that's unfair you know. I think we need to look at this traditional structures of academia and of libraries and you know [thinking] why aren't we having students and other staff members from outside that discipline in these steering committees at university they not participating in it... and if that is not able to happen how are you ensuring that you are hearing a range of voices how do you build the diversity into who's on these committees and from my experience at working at a university its generally someone knows someone (nepotism) therefore you know it's a personal choice that people are there.... you know I've been on some groups and there's people there where it's not their area of work but they've simply been invited because they're friends with the chair and that just perpetuates inequality ! We need people who know what they are talking about. I think libraries, I think my uni is really good and it's got better at communicating with its users but universities nor libraries cannot afford to remain closed and think these [wider] societal issues do not affect us. They

actually do because if you are perpetuating those structural inequalities than you are part of the problem, you are the problem, you are the structural issue... yeah yeah I think you're right I don't think within the neoliberal structure we can get the change that is needed.