



Emancipatory IR: Towards Critical Theories and Practices

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1. Introduction

Information retrieval (IR), the field that studies and builds tools like search engines and recommender systems, bear salient responsibilities to society. Consequently, Belkin and Robertson (1976) urged the community, half a century ago, to develop a theoretical foundation for understanding what constitutes societal good that can inform IR research and serve as a basis for determining when we should limit our scientific inquiry in the face of demands that are contradictory to societal good. In spite of their prescient call-to-action, IR finds itself today in exactly the troubling situation that Belkin and Robertson warned us about. While the IR community may have historically motivated its work through grand ambitions like “organiz[ing] the world’s information and mak[ing] it universally accessible and useful”¹ or supporting human cognition with information artifacts (Zobel, 2018), the reality of dominant search platforms is that they have materialized massive infrastructures for (i) large-scale user surveillance (Zuboff, 2023), (ii) commodification and harvesting of user attention (Wu, 2017), and increasingly (iii) manipulating user’s political and commercial preferences via generation of persuasive language and visualizations using generative AI (Mitra, Cramer, & Gurevich, 2024). IR platforms, like search engines and chatbots, are sites of struggle between oppression and social justice, and are being increasingly targeted for ideological capture by authoritarian state and private actors (Mitra, Neophytou, & Gururaja, 2026). This further intensifies today’s societal concerns around these platforms in light of the rising levels of democratic erosion worldwide and the increasing concentration of economic and political power in the hands of Big Tech. Therefore, we need urgent reflection and actions from the IR community to ensure that our work supports, and not hinders, social progress.

At the third Strategic Workshop in Information Retrieval in Lorne (SWIRL) (Culpepper, Diaz, & Smucker, 2018) in 2018, IR researchers in attendance recognized fairness, accountability, confidentiality, and transparency in IR (“FACT IR”) as consequential research directions for the field. Subsequently, a significant body of IR scholarship has emerged around fairness and explainability. However, how much of this research has meaningfully translated into societally positive outcomes in practice is debatable (Mitra, 2025). In spite of these research efforts, IR has failed to thwart the field from engaging in research that supports user surveillance and manipulation. Serious concerns about how proprietary platforms have concentrated power in the hands of few individuals and institutions—and have consequently made our information ecosystem vulnerable to authoritarian capture—have also hitherto received insufficient attention.

A key contributing factor here is the under-theorization of “societal good” in the field. After all, how can IR appraise its progress in affecting positive societal change—or limit its scientific inquiry that are contradictory to societal good—if it cannot articulate what societal good it aspires for? In recognition of this issue, there have been several recent calls for the field to explicate its values (Trippas, Culpepper, et al., 2025), norms (Vrijenhoek et al., 2023), and sociotechnical imaginaries (Mitra, 2025). In similar ethos, the ECIR 2026 IR-for-Good track adopted as its theme the question of “what is IR-for-Good?” (Mitra & Heuss, 2025) which also tries to get at this exact underlying tension in the field.

This talk is a provocation for the search engine community, and the broader field of IR, to engage in thoughtful deliberation over how to develop a shared normative position on societal good. I argue that for IR to develop its normative position will require the field to embrace critical theories and practices in our work, and shift away from the dominant liberal frame through which much of the IR community today view societal concerns in context of our ongoing research. The critical frame, unlike its liberal counterpart, makes explicit its goals of nondomination, anti-oppression, and emancipation which can



clarify our conceptualization of societal good within IR, provide necessary theoretical underpinning that Belkin and Robertson urged us to develop, and serve as a basis for critical appraisals of our progress in enacting desired societal change. Furthermore, the critical frame is grounded in structural understanding of systems of oppression, and its purview of concerns extend beyond how the system behaves to also include the sociopolitical context in which the system is embedded and who gets to exert their power and control over the system. Under the critical frame, the community is not constrained to exclusively exploring algorithmic mitigation strategies, and can also operationalize our right of refusal and to build radical alternatives. I implore the search engine community to reimagine how our research and the tools we develop can support our collectively emancipatory struggles, and call for the community to rigorously incorporate critical theories and practices in our research.

2. References

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