

Emancipatory Information Retrieval: Towards Critical IR Theories and Practices

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Abstract

Half a century ago, Belkin and Robertson called on the information science community to recognize the field's salient responsibility to society and urged us to develop a theoretical foundation for understanding what constitutes societal good that can inform information access research and technology development. Despite their prescient call-to-action, information retrieval (IR) today finds itself in a troubling situation. Our world is facing a confluence of several mutually reinforcing crises each of which intersects with concerns of social justice and emancipation, and in this moment of precarity, information access systems (e.g., search engines and chatbots) represent sites of conflict between oppression and emancipation. However, the current dominating frames of fairness and transparency are proving insufficient to address the emerging risks of user surveillance and manipulation and the risks of authoritarian capture of our information access platforms. These concerns are particularly serious today 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. This talk is a provocation to reimagine how IR can support our emancipatory struggles, and a call for the IR community to rigorously incorporate critical theories and practices in our research.

CCS Concepts

• Information systems → Information retrieval; World Wide Web; • Human-centered computing;

Keywords

Critical Theory, Search and Society, Emancipatory Information Retrieval, Sociotechnical Information Systems

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1 Biography

Bhaskar Mitra is an independent researcher based in Tiohtià:ke / Mooniyang / Montréal, Canada. His research focuses on AI-mediated

online information access and questions of social justice and emancipation in the context of these sociotechnical systems. He is currently serving as the ACM SIGIR Secretary and as an Associate Editor for the ACM Transactions on Information Systems (TOIS) journal. He has received several awards for his research, including two ACM SIGIR Early Career Researcher Awards (2024) for excellence in research and in community engagement. He received his Ph.D. (2021) in Computer Science from University College London. He previously worked at Microsoft for 19 years, first at Bing and then at Microsoft Research. However, last year he made the decision to leave Big Tech in objection to their harmful impact on society.



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