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From words to actions: assessing the impact of antiracist declarations in library and information science

Jonathan Furner, Fidelia Ibekwe, and Briony Birdi

Abstract

Introduction. *The aims of this paper are to reaffirm calls for the global elimination of racism in library and information science, to specify ways of making progress towards such elimination, and to indicate how to assess the extent to which the declarations made by international bodies have had an impact on the success of antiracist strategies in which library and information science professionals engage at the local level.*

Method. *A review is undertaken of the declarations on racism made by the United Nations (UN), and by two professional organisations: the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and the International Society for Knowledge Organization (ISKO). A case study approach is then taken in identifying antiracist strategies in library and information science in the United States.*

Analysis. *International declarations on racism are numerous and expansive, and are suggestive of several important categories of antiracist strategy.*

Results. *A means of assessing the relationship between declarations and strategies is proposed.*

Conclusions. *It is concluded that the impact of declarations has not been substantial. Affirmative action policies, hate speech bans, reparative taxonomies, and actions decentring whiteness are few and far between in library and information science. Renewed effort should be made to engage in antiracist strategies of the kinds promoted in the declarations.*

Topic areas

History, theory, and philosophy of information; Information ethics; Information work and workers; Knowledge organization; User diversity.

Keywords

Antiracism; International declarations; Library and information science; Racism.

Introduction

The murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 and the ensuing mass protests worldwide have marked a watershed in the fight against racism. In some countries, there is now broader acknowledgment of the systemic nature of the racism that affects the lives of Africans and people of African descent and of the need to address the past in order to secure future conditions of life that uphold the dignity and rights of all. It is our collective duty to address issues—immediately and everywhere. (UNHRC, 2021a, p. 1).

In response to the statement of collective duty by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in 2021, the aims of the present paper are as follows: (a) to reaffirm calls for the global elimination of racism in library and information science (LIS) generally, and the knowledge organization (KO) field specifically; (b) to specify ways of making progress towards such global elimination; and (c) to indicate how to assess the extent to which the declarations made by international bodies like the United Nations (UN), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and the International Society for Knowledge Organization (ISKO), have had an impact on the success of antiracist strategies in which LIS professionals engage at the local level.

Our definition of ‘racism’ covers both the verbal expression of *ideas* promoting negative discrimination on the basis of race, and the carrying out of *actions* that result in racial discrimination, whether or not they are motivated by racist ideas. In the sections that follow, we review the declarations on racism made by international organisations such as the UN, IFLA, and ISKO; we identify four antiracist strategies that have been followed in some national contexts, focusing on the United States as our primary case study, discussing how these strategies have been engaged in by LIS/KO institutions and professionals, and pointing out the limitations or obstacles that have been placed in the way of their full implementation; and we propose a means of assessing the relationship between declarations and the strategies put in place to combat racism.

Overview of selected declarations on racism

United Nations

Our notion that the global elimination of racism is possible, even in a relatively small domain such as LIS, is rooted in our observation of work done over the last 70 years by the United Nations in crafting international antiracist law. Although some have argued that such law’s impact has ‘*not matched its intent*’ (Spain Bradley, 2019), it is instructive to review the history of the ongoing efforts of the UN in this direction.

One of the main purposes of the UN is articulated in Article 1 of its Charter (<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>), signed in June 1945, as ‘*promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.*’ The UN’s *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR; United Nations, 1948) was adopted three years later. Article 1 of the UDHR states that ‘*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*’ Article 2 further proclaims that ‘*Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.*’ These foundational documents have been frequently cited by subsequent statements, declarations, and conventions dealing with racism.

In 1948, the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) called on UNESCO to propose ‘*a programme of dissemination of scientific facts designed to bring about the disappearance of that which is commonly called race prejudice*’ (UNESCO, 1950, p. 1). UNESCO complied by convening an international group of anthropologists and sociologists to meet as a committee of experts in 1949, and publish the outcome of the experts’ discussion as a ‘*Statement on Race*’ in 1950 (UNESCO, 1950, pp. 5–11; see also Brattain, 2007). Further statements were issued in 1951 (‘*Statement on the Nature of Race and Race Differences*’), 1964 (‘*Propositions on the Biological Aspects of Race*’), and 1967 (‘*Statement on Race and Racial Prejudice*’). All four are collected in *Four statements on the race question* (UNESCO, 1969).

In parallel to the UNESCO series of texts, the UN crafted the *United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* of 1963 (DERD; United Nations, 1963), and the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (ICERD; United Nations, 1965; see also Meron, 1985), adopted in 1965 and entering into force in 1969. A ‘*Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice*’ was issued by UNESCO in 1978, incorporating several new concepts, including the notion of group rights. Article 9 (UNESCO, 1978 p. 65) clarifies that ‘*[t]he principle of the equality in dignity and rights of all human beings and all peoples, irrespective of race, colour and origin, is a generally accepted and recognized principle of international law. Consequently any form of racial discrimination practised by a State constitutes a violation of international law*’ Three years after its publication, Lerner (1981, p. 61) articulated the hope that, ‘*while it is not*

equivalent to a convention or recommendation in the normative sense, the Declaration can become a keystone in the struggle against racialism and racial prejudice'

Following two World Conferences to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination held in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1978 and 1983, a World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) took place in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, leading to the *Durban Declaration and Programme of Action* (DDPA; United Nations, 2002; see also Camponovo, 2003), followed by the Durban Review Conference, Geneva, 2009 (<https://www.un.org/en/durbanreview2009/>); and in 2021 an 'Agenda towards Transformative Change for Racial Justice and Equality' (UNHRC, 2021b) was issued by the UN Human Rights Council in observance of the DDPA 20th Anniversary (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Racism/Pages/20th-anniversary-DDPA.aspx>).

All these UN programs share a basic affirmation of core principles of equality and non-discrimination, an emphasis on the primary responsibility of States for combating racism, and a focus on recommending practical mechanisms for achieving racial justice. The DDPA recognises explicitly that '*colonialism has led to racism,*' and that Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent, and Indigenous peoples continue to be victims of the consequences of colonialism. As noted in *Fighting Racism and Discrimination: The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action at 20* (UN OHCHR, 2021, p. 15),

Several States have recently begun taking measures to redress these historical wrongs and to address racism deeply entrenched in centuries of colonialism and enslavement. Actions include: Creation of historical foundations and national days for remembrance of victims of the slave trade; acknowledging and apologizing for past governments' part in the transatlantic slave trade; declaring slavery a crime against humanity; and establishing national commissions of inquiry on reconciliation and accountability for past wrongs against specific groups.

Fighting Racism and Discrimination recommends a 'victim-centred' approach: '*recognizing historical wrongs; providing access to justice and restitution; and empowering victims as champions for change.*' (p. 6). The 'Agenda towards Transformative Change for Racial Justice and Equality' (UNHRC, 2021b) similarly builds on 4 pillars:

- *Step up: Stop denying and start dismantling racism;*
- *Pursue justice: End impunity and build trust;*
- *Listen up: People of African descent must be heard;*
- *Redress: Confront past legacies, take special measures and deliver reparatory justice.*

Other practical recommendations include the following:

- human rights education at all levels, with a victim-oriented approach recommended for teaching '*the facts and truth of the history, causes, nature and consequences of racism*';
- making ideologies based upon racial superiority or hatred punishable offences;
- ensuring that political and legal systems reflect the multicultural diversity within societies; and
- '*enhancing data collection ... collected with the explicit consent of the victims, based on their self-identification and in accordance with provisions on human rights and fundamental freedoms*'

As of December 2021, ICERD had 89 State signatories, including the United States (see <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/MTDSG/Volume%20I/Chapter%20IV/IV-2.en.pdf>). Surprisingly, and perhaps tellingly, France is among those States that have not chosen to sign

ICERD, alongside Afghanistan, Albania, Gambia, Indonesia, and Qatar. The United States' consent to ICERD (given in 1994) is subject to the following reservation, *inter alia* (p. 10; see also Herndon, 2013):

That the Constitution and laws of the United States contain extensive protections of individual freedom of speech, expression and association. Accordingly, the United States does not accept any obligation under this Convention, ... to restrict those rights, through the adoption of legislation or any other measures, to the extent that they are protected by the Constitution and laws of the United States.

Almost fifty years after the promulgation of DERD (1963) and ICERD (1965), the UN's condemnation of racism continues. Article 8 of DERD had promised: '*All effective steps shall be taken immediately in the fields of teaching, education and information, with a view to eliminating racial discrimination and prejudice*' Despite a half-century's worth of words, few would argue today that that work is anywhere near completion.

IFLA and ISKO

While the UN's emphasis is on the responsibility of its member States to eradicate racism within their respective jurisdictions, not all of that responsibility should be shouldered by governmental organisations. Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) at the international and national levels, regardless of their specific field of interest, must also share the objectives of the UN antiracism programs. In the LIS and KO fields, the relevant international bodies representing their respective communities of practice are the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA; <https://ifla.org/>) and the International Society for Knowledge Organization (ISKO; <https://isko.org/>), and it is instructive to compare the approaches to antiracist policymaking of these two organizations.

IFLA's *Multicultural Library Manifesto* of 2009 (IFLA, 2009) asserts that libraries should:

- *serve all members of the community without discrimination based on cultural and linguistic heritage;*
- *provide information in appropriate languages and scripts;*
- *give access to a broad range of materials and services reflecting all communities and needs;*
- *employ staff to reflect the diversity of the community, who are trained to work with and serve diverse communities.*

The *Manifesto* also specifies that '*special attention*' should be paid to '*groups which are often marginalized in culturally diverse societies: minorities, asylum seekers and refugees, residents with a temporary residence permit, migrant workers, and indigenous communities.*' Racism as a cause of such marginalisation is not mentioned.

In June 2020, IFLA's President and Secretary General issued a brief statement asserting that '*Racism Has No Place in the Society Libraries Are Working to Build*' (Mackenzie and Leitner, 2020):

IFLA condemns all forms of racism as fundamentally contrary both to human rights, and to the values of our profession. Libraries are institutions with a mission to improve the lives of the individuals and communities they serve. They do this not just through rejecting discrimination, but through actively promoting inclusion, giving everyone a meaningful opportunity to realise their rights to information, culture, information and science. ... As a global organisation, IFLA is committed to enabling all to engage in and benefit from our activities, without regard to citizenship,

disability, ethnic origin, gender, geographical location, language, political philosophy, race or religion.

Prior to the issuance of its 2020 statement, IFLA's participation in the discourse around racism has been sporadic. Antiracism is not a stated priority of any of the organisation's sections. Nevertheless, IFLA's approach to issues of diversity in general is laser-focused when compared with ISKO's. ISKO's policy with respect to racism is non-existent; the smallest change would be an improvement. It is true, of course, that IFLA and ISKO have different scopes and missions: ISKO is much smaller, and is primarily concerned with supporting academic research on KO tools and practices. Nevertheless, the absence of ISKO policy statements on racism is surprising, especially given the level of interest exhibited among KO researchers in bias in KO systems.

Antiracist strategies

Our proposed approach for making progress towards the goal of the global elimination of racism is that of antiracist advocacy and practice (see, e.g., Bonnett, 2000; Kendi, 2019). Our understanding of 'antiracism' includes support, *inter alia*, for (a) affirmative action for underrepresented racial groups (see, e.g., Crosby et al., 2006; McCrudden, 2015; Warikoo & Allen, 2020), (b) banning hate speech and deplatforming racists (see, e.g., Howard, 2019; Leong & Whitfield, 2020), (c) reparations for historical victims of racism (see, e.g., Coates, 2014; Robinson-Sweet, 2018), and (d) decentring whiteness through the application of critical race theory (see, e.g., Espinal et al., 2018; Jennings & Kinzer, 2021). We shall briefly discuss each of these strategies in turn.

Affirmative action

Just like any other academic field, LIS/KO can be characterised demographically by considering the racial composition of its various groups of participants: its authors and readers; its journal editorial boards and conference program committees; its student cohorts and faculty members; and so on. The ongoing domination of most of these groups by white people indicates the operation of a systemic racism that can be countered only by deliberate application of affirmative action policies in favour of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) groups.

As Daniel Sabbagh (2011, p. 109) explains:

affirmative action encompasses any measure that allocates resources—such as admission to selective universities or professional schools, jobs, promotions, public contracts, business loans, or rights to buy, sell, or use land—through a process that takes into account individual membership in underrepresented groups. Its purpose is to increase the proportion of individuals from those groups in the labour force, entrepreneurial class, or student population from which they have been excluded as a result of state-sanctioned oppression in the past or societal discrimination in the present.

U.S. Census data from 2020 indicates that the Black and Latinx communities accounted for approximately 13% and 19% of the total U.S. population, respectively (see Table 1). In 2000 (the latest year for which figures are available), Black and Latinx librarians made up 5% and 2% of the total number of librarians; in 2019, Black and Latinx full-time college professors amounted to 6% and 5% of the total. According to 2020 data supplied by the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), Black and Latinx faculty in LIS stood at 4% and 3%; master's students at 5% and 8%; and doctoral students at 4% and 4%. The discrepancies between the diversity of the general population and that of LIS-related groups are obvious (see also, e.g., Espinal et al., 2018; Poole et al., 2021). The two principal ways of

addressing such discrepancies are (a) scholarship programs for students from underrepresented communities (see, e.g., Cooke, 2014), and (b) affirmative action in favour of college applicants from historically excluded groups (see, e.g., Jones, 2005)—although several states have prohibited the consideration of race in the evaluation of applications to public universities. California banned race-based affirmative action in 1996, Florida in 1999, and Michigan in 2006. A proposition to repeal 1996’s Proposition 209 was put forward in California in 2020, but defeated. The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA collates research relating to affirmative action in the U.S. (<https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/college-access/affirmative-action>); Mickey-Pabello (2020), for example, records that ‘[a]ffirmative action bans result in decreased racial and ethnic diversity in higher education,’ that such bans ‘discourage applications from URM [under-represented minority] students,’ and that ‘[c]olleges find alternative pathways to race-based plans, but they are insufficient to maintain the racial diversity that affirmative action provides.’

	American Indian and Alaska Native	Asian	Black or African American	Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	Hispanic or Latino	Non-resident Alien	Two or More Races	Unknown	White
Population, 2020 ^a	1	6	13	0	19	n/a	3	n/a	60
Librarians, 2000 ^b	0	3	5	0	2	n/a	1	n/a	89
Full-Time Faculty, 2019 ^c	0	10	6	0	5	6	1	3	68
Post-Baccalaureate Students, 2019 ^d	0	7	12	0	10	14	3	n/a	52
LIS Faculty, 2020 ^e	0	14	4	2	3	3	1	15	59
LIS Master’s Degrees Granted, 2020 ^e	1	4	5	0	8	4	3	12	64
LIS Doctoral Degrees Granted, 2020 ^e	0	11	4	0	4	36	2	9	33

All figures are percentages.

^a <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/POP010220>

^b <https://www.ala.org/tools/librarian-ethnicity>

^c https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_315.20.asp

^d https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_306.10.asp

^e <https://www.alise.org/statistical-report->

Table 1. U.S. population, librarians, full-time faculty, post-baccalaureate students, LIS faculty, LIS master’s students, and LIS doctoral students by race.

Students are less likely to embark on a master’s- or doctoral-level program if they do not see faculty who look like them; but faculty diversity will never improve so long as there are so few Black and Latinx doctoral degree-holders to fill the faculty positions that open up. Any proposed solution must involve the explicit recognition that the present situation is the result of long years of structural and systemic racism, and an explicit commitment to repealing affirmative action bans so that race may once again be considered as a factor in admissions decisions.

Hate speech bans

Librarians' principled opposition to censorship and support for freedom of speech are put to their severest test when the content in question is racist or otherwise qualifies as hate speech. (See Brown, 2017, for a philosophical analysis of the concept of hate speech; Carlson, 2021, for a summary of current issues relating to hate speech globally.) Against the American Library Association's assertion in the *Library Bill of Rights* that '*Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation*' (ALA, 1996), we may place Jesse Shera's contention (Shera, 1967), that

[w]hen a librarian really believes that a book is harmful, that its content is contrary to the welfare of the community, or that it is destructive of good taste, even if those are his opinions only, he has not only the right, but also the obligation to do what he properly can to keep that book out of the hands of those whom he thinks might be injured by it.

Nevertheless, calls to ban hate speech in libraries have been explicitly resisted by many librarians in the United States. Tom Twiss, for example, reports that the Action Council of the ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) is '*convinced that attempts to fight hate speech by such means will be hopelessly ineffective and dangerously counterproductive*' (Twiss, 2019, p. 4), citing studies in which hate speech laws have been observed to suppress the rights of the very minority groups they are intended to protect (see, e.g., Strossen, 2018). Other opposition to hate speech bans emphasises the difficulty of accurately identifying hate speech by automated means, primarily for implementation on social media platforms. For surveys of approaches to hate speech detection see, for example, Fortuna and Nunes (2019) and MacAvaney et al. (2019). According to the latter authors, among the difficulties in automatically identifying hate speech are '*subtleties in language, differing definitions on what constitutes hate speech, and limitations of data availability for training and testing of these systems*' (p. 1). Furthermore, '*many recent approaches suffer from an interpretability problem—that is, it can be difficult to understand why the systems make the decisions that they do*' (p. 1).

Hate speech remains off the list of the categories of expression that are unprotected by First Amendment law in the United States (see, e.g., Farber, 2009). Yet many other countries, including liberal democracies, implement hate speech bans. In German law, for example, the basic right to dignity trumps all other rights, including the right to free expression, and speech that '*assaults the human dignity*' of others is criminalised. In France, an entire arsenal of laws on the freedom of the press includes laws that aim to outlaw discrimination: Article 24 of the 1881 law (https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/article_lc/LEGIARTI000043982456/) states that '*discrimination, hatred or violence against a person or group of persons because of their origin or their membership or non-membership of a particular ethnic group, nation, race or religion*' will not be tolerated. The problem with such laws is the difficulty of proving discrimination, since the French judicial system places the burden of the proof on the victims. Given the subtle nature of structural and systemic racism, proving that one is being discriminated against is, in many instances, almost impossible. Many victims do not come forward because they face an uphill task, and the reporting and redress mechanisms are often ineffectual and hostile towards the victims.

The '*good news*' is that '*most countries, with the exception of the United States, have designated hate speech as something that should be considered unacceptable in public life*' (Carlson, 2021, p. 90).

Reparations

Victims of violations of international human rights law have a right to reparations in the form of *‘restitution, compensation for harm, and rehabilitation in mind, body, and status’* (Magarrell, 2007, p. 1). Such measures might include *‘symbolic gestures such as an official apology or the erection of a monument, legal actions such as the restoration of rights or exoneration of a conviction, or material compensation such as direct payments to victims of their descendants, restoration of property, or payments to funds or assistance programs’* (Robinson-Sweet, 2018, p. 25). As Anna Robinson-Sweet argues, archivists can not only assist in reparations claims by identifying evidence of past abuses, but also offer reparative justice *‘from within’* the archives by making appraisal and description decisions that serve to highlight such evidence.

Robinson-Sweet (2018, p. 33) cites Tonia Sutherland’s (2017) indictment of *‘archives’ continued failure to collect materials documenting violence against black Americans,* and calls on archivists to be *‘activists for the public’s right to uncover the past,’* by *‘seeking out collections that document ... human rights violations ... and also prioritizing access to these materials.’* Echoing Jeannette Bastian (2005), Robinson-Sweet relates how the *‘whispers’* of an oppressed population in colonial archives may be revealed by assigning provenance to the subjects of records rather than their makers. The parallels between archival appraisal and description on the one hand, and library collection development and cataloguing on the other, should be obvious. Alyssa Jennings and Kristine Kinzer (2021) advocate for the creation and maintenance of collection development policies *‘that tip the balance away from white, Eurocentric materials and toward BIPOC (and other diverse populations),’* as well as the design of LibGuides *‘with a CRT [critical race theory] and antiracist lens’* and *‘displays highlighting racial history to educate the general public.’*

Turning to KO: Some of the products of KO that are distinctive to the domain are classification schemes, controlled vocabularies, metadata schemata, ontologies, and taxonomies. These different types of tools are related to one another in that they each consist of a set of terms, labels, or captions, and a set of relationships among those terms. Racist thinking can infect both sets of items: terminology can be offensive, while structures of relationships can reflect white supremacy (see, e.g., Olson, 2002). Moreover, KO tools created for use in general contexts are often premised on a type of universalism that derives from the colonialist era and that may also be critiqued from an antiracist perspective. Melissa Adler (2016, p. 631; see also Adler, 2017) suggests that an appropriate remedy for such instances of taxonomic violence is reparative in nature:

‘Repair’ does not refer to a correction of legacies of wrong-doings, but rather, it is a matter of truth-telling, accountability, negotiation, redistribution, and redress. It is vital that KO scholars continue to do critical historical work to understand the ways in which violence has become systemic, what that means for access to information, how classifications affect self-knowledge and identity formation for seekers of information, and the consequences for making and doing histories of peoples, communities, nations, and territories.

For Adler, a core element of this *‘critical historical work’* is the construction of reparative taxonomies that *‘consciously respond’* to injustice and the marginalisation of *‘others’* in legacy KO schemes, by redistributing classes and giving taxonomic space to the previously silenced and disenfranchised. As Adler points out, reparative taxonomies might be considered a subset of the *‘liberatory descriptive standards’* that Wendy Duff and Verne Harris (2002) promote to archivists.

Decentring whiteness

The Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida is famously quoted as saying ‘*Il n’ya pas de hors-texte*’ (‘*There is no out-of-text*’; Derrida, 1967, p. 227). This is sometimes paraphrased as ‘*There is no view from nowhere*,’ suggesting that neutrality of viewpoint is, at best, a sign of naivety and an illusion, and, at worst, a façade behind which people hide in order to evade addressing injustice, prejudice, and racism. The point is especially important when it comes to discussing the concept of whiteness.

Jennings and Kinzer (2021) define ‘whiteness’ by reference not just to race, but also to ‘*the structure in America that systematically benefits people living as white.*’ For Jennings and Kinzer, ‘*[w]hiteness is very much still the norm in librarianship.*’ Showing how to dismantle, or decentre, whiteness in LIS through antiracist action is the focus of their article. Such action is intended to make systemic change, ‘*foster[ing] an environment conducive to retention, meaningful inclusion and agency for BIPOC library workers.*’ A list of ‘*ways that individuals, small groups and library departments can decentre whiteness*’ includes the following:

- 1. *Self-education—read about topics like the Black Lives Matter movement, colonialism and Native Americans, Japanese internment camps, white supremacy, etc.*
- 6. *Work with administration to make sure BIPOC are able to participate at every level, including ensuring that BIPOC are represented in managerial ranks, and that they participate in key decision/policy-making processes.*
- 11. *Craft, display and adhere to library statements that express BIPOC solidarity, diversity commitment, and/or a land acknowledgment (recognizes the indigenous people who originally lived on the land where the institution now resides).*

Jennings and Kinzer also suggest that courses/modules on critical race theory (CRT; see, e.g., Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) be added as requirements to the MLIS degree, and that the American Library Association (ALA) develop an antiracist advisory board that ‘*sets standards to advocate for the decentring of whiteness and re-education of the field from the top down.*’

With Executive Order (EO) 13950 of September 22, 2020

(<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/09/28/2020-21534/combating-race-and-sex-stereotyping>), U.S. President Trump ruled that federal funds would in the future be withheld from those who promote ‘*race or sex stereotyping or scapegoating*’:

Today ... many people are pushing a ... vision of America that is grounded in hierarchies based on collective social and political identities rather than in the inherent and equal dignity of every person as an individual. This ideology is rooted in the pernicious and false belief that America is an irredeemably racist and sexist country; that some people, simply on account of their race or sex, are oppressors; and that racial and sexual identities are more important than our common status as human beings and Americans.

Perceived by many to constitute a direct attack on the core values of critical race theory, this EO and its reception represented a setback for public understanding of the necessity for action against white privilege, and, by extension, a further setback for the development of antiracist higher education. President Biden revoked EO 13950 with EO 13985 of January 20, 2021: ‘*Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government*’ (<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/25/2021-01753/advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the->

[federal-government](#)). Federal funding was thus restored for training sessions that make use of ideas from CRT—but for how long?

Towards an assessment of the impact of declarations

Eric Neumayer (2005, p. 925) asks, ‘*Do international human rights treaties make a difference in reality? Does their ratification lead to improved respect for human rights in the country ratifying the treaty’s provisions?*’ Replacing the term ‘human rights’ in these questions with ‘antiracism’ reveals the questions examined at this point of the present paper (see also Heyns & Viljoen, 2001).

Neumayer makes several contributions of great interest. First, he provides an overview of ‘*what theory would lead us to expect regarding the effectiveness of international ... treaties*’ (p. 925); second, he reviews existing empirical studies; and third, he derives an intriguing conclusion from his own study (p. 926):

In short, we find that a beneficial effect of ratification of human rights treaties is typically conditional on the extent of democracy and the strength of civil society groups as measured by participation in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with international linkages. In the absence of democracy and a strong civil society, treaty ratification has no effect and is possibly even associated with more human rights violations.

Distinguishing the direct effects of antiracist declarations from the indirect effects of other elements of the broader context for antiracist strategies is highly problematic. The ascription, to a specific declaration, of the direct cause of a given strategy can never be better than speculative. Notwithstanding this inherent difficulty, we suggest that it might be instructive to correlate (a) ratification of declarations, with (b) presence of affirmative action policies, hate speech bans, reparative taxonomies, and actions decentring whiteness, hypothesising that (all other factors being equal) ratification increases the chances that any given country hosts antiracist strategies.

Even though the United States is home to a large proportion of the international LIS community, and its literature is replete with examples of papers establishing the benefits of antiracist practice in theory, relatively few cases of actual antiracist activity along the lines described above have been documented. Here we may suggest that the issue is not so much an undeveloped democracy or a weak civil society, but rather strong beliefs in (a) the immorality of discrimination, whether *simplex* or ‘reverse,’ (b) the primacy of freedom of expression as a core value, (c) the authority of the cultural institutions (such as the Library of Congress) that have established hegemony over selection and description practices, and (d) the supposedly excessive radicalism of CRT.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have taken a few short steps towards an assessment of the impact of international declarations on antiracist strategy in LIS, with a primary focus on the situation in the United States as a case study. Our conclusion is that such impact has not been substantial. Affirmative action policies, hate speech bans, reparative taxonomies, and actions decentring whiteness—our chosen exemplars of antiracist strategy—are few and far between, despite the United States’ quarter-century-old ratification of ICERD. While the recent interest in incorporating antiracism and diversity content in LIS curricula in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand is an encouraging sign (see, e.g., Gibson et al., 2018), the situation is far from uniform. European LIS institutions, for example, are yet to acknowledge the racial undertones of their classification schemes, or the under-representation (and, in most cases, absence) of non-white people in their staff populations, professional

workforce, and faculty, especially in **management** positions (heads of school or of research units). There is as of yet no deep soul-searching or meaningful review of KO systems used by many libraries, archives, and museums in continental Europe. Much remains to be done. With renewed calls for the global elimination of racism made by the UN and IFLA, it is to be hoped that all learned societies, professional associations, and conference organisations in library and information science are inspired to issue a similar declaration (complete with the specification of measurable outcomes), and that library and information professionals in the United States and in other countries are inspired to engage in antiracist practice—in actions, that is, not just in words or ideas.

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