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Empty calories? A fragment on LIS white papers and the political sociology of LIS elites

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ABSTRACT

White papers – reports conveying research or recommendations on a complex issue – arrive in the inboxes of academic librarians, along with an obligation to monitor them if they can help one's library or university. They seem to invariably disappoint, the written equivalent of empty calories. This paper asks: is this true? If so, how so? And why? To answer, a selection method produced a modest subset of current, topical white papers to analyze – hence this article as a fragment on recent, topical white papers. A simple discourse analysis was performed to find if there was a broad pattern the documents followed, and if a more analysis was required. A clue as to why this pattern prevailed came from criticisms of prognostications about the current pandemic (as of this writing), leading to a return to the reports: who authored them, and how they are situated in political-sociological terms in LIS discourse? The concluding findings fit with earlier analyses, suggesting much about prestige in LIS and how that is maintained, how practices are (and are not) formulated – and what that has to do with the white papers.

Introduction

It happened again, as it has so many times. A white paper1 with a promising title came across my e-mail. I did what I try always to do: I left it highlighted, or bookmarked it, or printed a copy, or jotted a quick note to go back to it. My job responsibilities mean I have an obligation to monitor information and research that can help my library and/or my university. When an opportunity arises – lunch at my desk, a bit of time at the end of the day, a cancelled meeting – I return to it. Reading through, I am almost invariably disappointed. “How we done it good” publications in library and information science (LIS) are often denigrated as not-real-research, but at least such publications report on something actually being done – usually a definite course of action to solve a problem – and what worked (or didn’t) for a library, and recent analyses suggest a research ethos and methodology actually informs them (Clarke, 2018a, 2018b). So many white papers pertaining to LIS seem not to do even this; the written equivalent of empty calories. The question is, is this really true? If so, how so? And why? Thinking through these questions required more than grousing about on-the-fly disappointments. There are simply too many white papers produced over too many years to survey all of them, or even a large set. To investigate in a manageable way a selection method was needed to produce a modest subset of white papers to analyze, with an emphasis on recency, topicality and a modest spread of topics – hence this article as a fragment. Once formulated, the white papers were reviewed and a simple discourse analysis was performed to find if there was a structure or a broad pattern that they followed, and if a more detailed technical analysis was called for. Why this particular pattern prevailed came in the form current events: prognostications about the fallout from the ongoing pandemic (as of this writing) and criticisms thereof. This led to a return to the reports: who authored them, and how they are situated in political-sociological terms in LIS discourse? Put another way, is there a cogent explanation for how the white papers and their authors are situated in LIS: the why question. The remainder of this paper will follow this outline.

A selection method for the white papers

The universe of white papers in LIS is very large, and needed to be narrowed. It made sense to choose from among a subset of reports that dealt with academic libraries – it is the sector of LIS with which I am – and readers of this journal are – most familiar. Second, for brevity’s sake limiting the publications to the last 36 months (maximum) as of this writing should mean the reports retain topicality. Third, at least one of the authors should be formally linked to the organization that produced the white paper since the definition states that it is done under its

1 By “white paper” I mean formal reports and publications as well as posts done under an organization’s imprimatur to concisely convey research or information on a complex issue so good decisions are made or problems solved (Stanford Law School, 2015).

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imprimatur. Fourth and last, given that the topic is libraries and higher education, the organization should be nonprofit – that is, much like a think-tank if not actually one. The reason is that there are many for-profit organizations producing white papers as pitches for a particular product or solution for academic librarianship in which they have a financial or professional interest. The white paper genre has become generalized well beyond its origin in government reports and policy recommendations (see the source in footnote 1).

There are a number of notable and relevant organizations that produce white papers. Pew Research produces reports on libraries (https://www.pewresearch.org/search/libraries), but only a few touch on academic libraries (most out of the date range). Both EDUCAUSE (https://www.educause.edu/) and the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) (https://www.cni.org/about-cni) specifically seek to advance technology agendas in higher education – relevant, but covering only slice of higher education and sliding close to the for-profit interests of technology firms. OCLC’s Research Reports (https://www.oclc.org/research/publications/reports.html) share a bit of both of the previous limitations. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) produces white papers on a range of topics addressing academic libraries (https://www.arl.org/who-we-are/), but their reports are very often from members or outside consultants, not necessarily representing ARL itself. And, they are primarily aimed at the research library community, not the whole of academic librarianship. Ithaka S + R (ISR) is the best candidate as a source of white papers to select from among. ISR is an independent nonprofit with a broad focus on “help[ing] academic and cultural communities know what is coming next, learn from rigorous and well-designed research studies, and adapt to new realities and opportunities [by offering] strategic advice and support services [to] help institutions improve their performance and further their missions. We generate action-oriented research for institutional decision-making and act as a hub to promote and guide collaboration across the communities we serve” (https://sr.ithaka.org/about/). ISR has produced a plethora of white papers across a range of topics on or relevant to academic libraries as of this writing (https://sr.ithaka.org/?s=library), and many of those publications include members of the ISR staff as authors or coauthors: of the roughly 28 white papers (as defined here) of varying types that dealt with academic libraries in the last 36 months as of this writing, 23 of them had ISR-staff authors or coauthors, fitting the selection criteria. Five of those – one from the second half of 2017, two from 2018 (an extra for topical coverage), and one each from 2019 and the first half of 2020 – were chosen to analyze, covering a range of relevant topics: a survey of academic library leaders, community college students and their libraries, new academic library services, individual scholarly collection and data practices and libraries, and international students.

The white papers: a simple first step of analysis

Conducting a basic discourse analysis is a logical first step. “Basic” here means simply “adopting a certain perspective on the asking and answering of … questions” and taking the language and the documents seriously as data (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999, 135). Specifically, basic discourse analysis identifies the “elements” of an account that structures it (Labov, 1999). Helpfully, in the “about” quote above ISR has provided a straightforward set of structuring elements in its white papers:

Element 1 (E1) Generate action-oriented research/learn from research.
Element 2 (E2) Adapt to new realities and opportunities/help know what is coming next.
Element 3 (E3) Improve institutional decision-making/strategic advice to further missions and collaboration.

As such, the ISR white papers do style themselves around these elements and the genre. For instance, the community college-library paper was “focused on understanding (1) how ‘student success’ can be defined so that it is inclusive both of students’ own needs as well as important policy priorities (E2), and (2) what services colleges and their academic libraries can offer to most effectively support students in their attainment of success (E3) … answering these questions through three phases: A qualitative discovery phase …; A service concept development phase …; and An assessment phase, in which we will evaluate the service concepts with community college students…” (E1) (Wolf-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). The Elements are all clearly present here, as they are in the phrasing of each of the reports:

- “In the face of evolving user needs, many academic libraries are reimagining … services…. As instruction moves online, how can libraries … support … teaching and learning? As research becomes more reliant on data, computation, and collaboration, where can libraries best add value? As … diverse student populations and … contingent faculty [increase] what is the library’s role? As budgets shrink, how [to] prioritize … resources and services…? (E2) … At its core [this methodology] is driven by evidence and bolstered by creativity … piloted with multiple college partners over the course of two years” (E1, E3) (Wolf-Eisenberg & Schonfeld, 2019).
- “[T]he deep and representative findings (E1) … help us understand the strategies and aspirations that were being pursued immediately before the [pandemic] crisis hit (E2). And, they can thereby serve as a guide to academic libraries … as they determine which strategies to double down on, and which to abandon, when they resume campus operations” (E3) (Schonfeld in Frederick & Wolf-Eisenberg, 2020).
- “Scholars are not managing [their collections] optimally … for their own research needs, sharing … meeting funder requirements, or … long-term preservation…. [F]unding regulations [and] requirements are inconsistent and there is little oversight. [S]cientific datasets … get quite a bit of attention [but] a large and diverse set of content … underlies scholarship in many fields (E2), … [H]ow can we leverage insight about current scholarly collecting habits (E1) towards making strategic decisions at the institutional level … and how should [we] be involved in supporting and leveraging the work of scholars as collectors?” (E3) (Cooper & Rieder, 2018, 2–4).
- “While enrollment of international students has grown considerably (E2) … investigations into their information practices and library needs are limited …. and … rarely … enables comparative analysis … [which] is critical … (E3) Survey questions [were] primarily designed to … determine how international and domestic graduate students differ” (E1) (Hinchliffe & Wolf-Eisenberg, 2017).

The problem comes in with the information generated, the conclusions reached and the recommendations on decisions to be made. The language quoted above mimics the tough-minded style of the “about” section in its language of action-oriented research and learning from research, new realities, strategic advice, and mission-driven decisioning, but the actual research content and conclusions fall far short of this posture. The ISR academic library administrator survey is one the organization’s flagship reports, and while it cannot be faulted for the intervention of the pandemic as it was being generated, it does not take a think tank to re-document in 2020 that budgets and the institutional value placed on libraries are declining and worrisome, that diversity and equity in the field is inadequate, and that student success, e-resources and services are increasing as investments (< E1, < E2) (Frederick & Wolf-Eisenberg, 2020). These are obvious, consistent themes in the higher education press like the Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed, the LIS press, and even the occasional national piece in the Washington Post or the New York Times. A think tank’s research production or concatenation of various research (a white paper) is meant to tell us something new that we wouldn’t ordinarily know, or know as well.
The exact same thing can be said of the white paper on community college students: some lack computers and it is consequently hard to read academic material on a phone screen, money, daycare and time management/work schedules are issues, their education is viewed as an economic opportunity, and their libraries are seen as oases of quiet, help and focus (<E1, <E2> (Wolf-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). None of this is surprising or insightful and is covered in the national press as well as the higher education and LIS press. The same point can be made on scholars’ data and personal research collections: of course they curate physical and digital content they find useful in their research, and of course they keep what they produce (<E1, <E2> (Cooper & Riegel, 2018). Research already documented the issue and needs on data preservation, security and sharing a full decade before this particular ISR white paper (see the Introduction in Akers & Doty, 2013). Informally, by an academic library director (Sirmgeour, 2012) in 2012 in the New York Times asked some of the pertinent questions already: “Will private collections in the digital environment add value to university libraries, or will they be constrained by complex copyright laws? Will they convey a unique [scholarly] ethos … [and be] adopted and become the companions of a new generation of students and scholars?”

The conclusions drawn from research are often tepid at best. On international students, though the “results of the survey are extensive … none of the differences between the means are very substantial” (<E1). That domestic students “are more likely to access information resources online from an off-campus location [and] interact with librarians/library staff members” is unsurprising given that they are domestic students with other places to stay/live off campus after all, and unlike international students are familiar with campus institutions and the ways of its personnel (US academic librarians) (<E2). Nor is it surprising that “international students place substantially more importance on collaborating on original research” since they have invested significant resources and come a long distance for what will likely be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity (<E3). That “international students … no longer vary as greatly from their domestic counterparts as they once did” is attributed to library orientation efforts (!), only making passing reference to the massive ongoing effects of globalization – including on research processes and resources (<E1). Further comparative research is recommended (<E1) (Hinchliffe & Wolf-Eisenberg, 2017). A recommendation on how to go about investigating the design of new academic library services (not recommendations on the services themselves) declares blandly that success “requires valuation of user perspectives, creativity and openness to new approaches, comfort with brainstorming before prioritization, and a strong facilitator to bring groups of individuals through the process together” (<E1, <E2), and can be done in big or small institutions (and presumably medium ones too), across more than one institution, within an institution, with subgroups, or done “to develop a holistic user experience within a single institution.” This one-size-fits-all method addresses higher education’s “need to gather additional evidence beyond what is currently available to inform the development of new service offerings” (<E3) (Wolf-Eisenberg & Schonfeld, 2019, 10–11).

There is a role for documenting and establishing on-the-ground facts (empirically confirming them), but collectively the white papers traffic in bromides, ask rhetorical questions, repeat what we already know/knew we needed to do, and come to no hard conclusions, hedging even these by recommending adaptation to local circumstances and further research. The tough-minded language describing what the white papers are doing morphs into a confection of empty calories: a promising wrapper containing little of practical value. No further deep reading, unpacking and coding of social assumptions, ideology, social structure, control and power relations embedded in the language of the white papers is needed: while neoliberal- and change-discourses like those found by Stevenson (forthcoming) are evident, quality discourse analysis unearthing that language or driving assumptions in the white papers has already been done (e.g. Stevenson, 2020, forthcoming; Waugh, 2014; Soutter, 2016; Buschman, 2017) and those results can easily be mapped to the documents here. Two of the three questions driving this article have been answered: the sampled white papers reveal that the empty calories thesis has merit, specifically in light of the tough-minded language on what purpose and role they claim to fulfill (the Elements). There is less than meets the eye to these white papers. The more interesting question is why this is so. This question will inform the remainder of this paper.

Why? Enter pandemic predictions

Why would ISR white papers, produced under the organization’s imprimatur, claim to authoritatively convey information and research on complex issues so that good, strategic decisions are made or problems solved – and then deliver much less? The current pandemic and criticisms of the predictions surrounding it offer a key insight. Scholars from very different disciplines and vantage points have come to roughly the same conclusion:

- Steven Pearlstein (2020), professor of public affairs at George Mason University: “Hardly a day goes by that some otherwise sober and well-grounded observer offers a sweeping prediction that the coronavirus will change just about everything” about the economy, but the predictions contain “rampant myopia and overreach” and avoid unpleasant and logical-but-less-flashy conclusions about it.
- Robert Kelchen (2020), associate professor of higher education at Seton Hall University: “Over the past few weeks, hundreds of colleges have made statements about their plans for the fall semester … [but] politicians and public-health officials–not college presidents–are going to determine when colleges are allowed to open. … [B]usiness as usual [is highly doubtful] because of concerns with … the intermingling of younger students and older faculty and staff members. … So why are some [presidents] still expressing public confidence?…?” To keep students enrolled … political posturing … [and] sheer optimism.”
- Mark Lilla (2020), professor of humanities at Columbia University: “The public square is thick today with augurs and prophets claiming to foresee the post-Covid world to come. I … have been [asked] … what the pandemic will mean for the American presidential election, populism [etc. and reporters] seem awfully put out when I say I have no idea. With daily life frozen, there are fewer newsworthy events to be reported on … yet … the 24/7 cable news machine must be fed … [and] attention turns toward the future. But the post-Covid future doesn’t exist. It will exist only after we have made it. … [N]othing is predestined. How many people fall ill with it depends on how they behave, how we test them, how we treat them and … in developing a vaccine. The result of those decisions will then limit the choices about reopening that employers, mayors, university presidents and sports club owners are facing.”

Setting aside the pandemic proper, what each is saying in a different way is that prognosticators are guessing as Lilla (2020) puts it – another version of empty calories. Further, there is a sociological grouping with an interest in putting the particular guesses out there (e.g. university presidents, pundits, reporters economic forecasters). Following Lilla, Pearlstein, and Kelchen, could this idea of an interest grouping linked to guesses/empty calories be helpful in explaining the thesis? We turn first to the question of a grouping.

Who? Political sociology and LIS elites

A recent analysis of the controversies surrounding the former Beall’s list of predatory journals and Beall himself (Buschman, 2020) – suggests a connection to our question and some characteristics of a grouping – which might go some ways in helping to explain the white papers (the why question). In that earlier study political sociology was adapted and
deployed as a tool to analyze power within and among (the political part) social and organizational relationships (the sociological part) in the Beall’s List affair. Four groupings were identified as playing a prominent role in the affair: the hegemon of science/scientists, political romantics, librarians, and elite pluralists. It is this last group that is of interest here: the “chefs” at the Scholarly Kitchen blog (https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/chefs/) were the identified elite pluralists who commented on and interacted extensively with Beall and his list. Without repeating the entire analysis, this grouping fits Winter’s (1993, 184) description of LIS elites: “oriented toward national and international networking trends ... remote from ... routine organizational problems ... often [identifying] with ... foundations, boards ... and other administrative networks [and] leaning[ing] toward the elite corporate culture that controls telecommunications technology [and] publishing.” Of particular interest here is that the “chefs” grouping overlaps with ISR: four appear on ISR’s site as authors when their names are searched, one of whom – Schonfeld – is a Director at ISR, and another eight have had their research or work cited/mentioned in ISR papers when searched – exactly half the current “chefs” as of this writing.

This overlap is not definitive. Rather, it simply suggests that ISR may well share a sociology with the “chefs,” and that this grouping bears further investigation. In terms of an “elite” designation, ISR is affiliated with JSTOR (itself a high-prestige LIS project from the 1990s) and the related Portico and Artstor projects (https://tinyurl.com/ISR990) – all initially Mellon Foundation funded. ISR “partners with foundations, consortia, and individual institutions” (https://ar.iathaka.org/), receiving funding from publishers like Elsevier and Wiley, Mellon, the Luce Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Park Service, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services among others – all named as funding sources in various white papers coming up in searches. The most recent IRS Form 990 (https://tinyurl.com/ISR990) lists top salaries fully commensurate with university presidents, provosts, vice presidents and deans in the listing of highest paid personnel, and grant income of more than four million dollars per year (over two years) along with revenues from JSTOR and other programs. Given the sociology and overlap with the previously analyzed “chefs,” the salaries, and funding affiliations with prestigious foundations, agencies and publishers, and the level of grant support ISR receives from those sources, it is reasonable to characterize the ISR white papers as emanating from an elite LIS grouping.

Such a grouping is not unique. Sapp and Gilmour (2002, 354, 2003) did a two-part “brief history of the future of academic libraries” from 1975 to 2000, identifying a “body of speculative and conjectural writings” that addressed “great hope and great concern” at the turn of the millennium, written by LIS elites: coverage of publications by Ivy League and ARL directors and associate university librarians, consultants, library school professors, prestigious scientists, American Library Association presidents, and consultants – all of whom “spoke” for the profession and cited one another in their discourse – dominate the two articles. A third, smaller analysis that sampled stentorian calls for change on the part of the profession (Buschman, 2003, 10–11) cited seven authors who appeared in the Sapp and Gilmore pieces, and of the remaining seven authors one was a blue-ribbon government panel, one was senior vice president of a prominent (at the time) library systems firm, one was director of a college library, one was president and CEO of OCLC, one was an associate director of an ARL library, one was former city librarian of Los Angeles-turned-consultant, and one was a ARL library-administrator-turned-publisher-and-consultant. The point is that LIS elites have “voice” and speak for the profession (Warren, 1996), referring and responding to one another in circular fashion. Though the ISR grouping fits this political sociology profile, the issue here is different than the earlier analysis of the Beall’s List affair: returning to our pandemic-prognostication lession, what is the grouping’s interest, and can political sociology help explain why the ISR white papers might be empty calories? It is the pluralist part of LIS elite pluralists that gives us an analytical path.

**Political sociology: pluralism, elites and LIS elites**

Classic pluralism makes the empirical assumption that groupings around values and interests occur naturally (Truman, 2003). Pluralism “most closely corresponds to what is taught in “high school textbooks” and accounts in the “mass media,” and is “what many Americans believe”: that power is dispersed and “different groups have power on different issues,” mimicking the free-market economy in competing for influence, enshrining a particular form of consumer-like political sovereignty (Domhoff, 2005). As distinct from political theory, pluralism thus claims to be hard-headedly realist and empirical (Cunningham, 2002, 73–82). It was both dominant in political science as a theoretical and research paradigm during the mid-twentieth century, and though heavily critiqued, its influence continues, often operating as the background of current work (Hindman, 2017; Marsh, 2002, 17–18; Edelman, 1997, 103). Elite pluralism makes corollary empirical claims and assumptions:

- Avoiding loaded claims that elites arise naturally in human nature (Cunningham, 2002, 80) elite pluralists fall back on the observation that modern society is highly complex, requiring a level of “special knowledge” (Dahl, 1989, 333) and that “skilled and imaginative” approaches and attitudes are required for this complexity to function well (Held, 2006, 157, 150–151).
- Elite pluralists thus know the “rules of the game” in (properly) pursuing the values and interests of those natural groupings (Truman, 2003, 368).
- In describing a set of empirical realities, elite pluralism’s investigations and explanations claim a kind-of neutral, value free status (Edelman, 1997, 106).

There is among elite pluralists a pronounced tendency to “overlook the ways that some sources of [influence] derive from possession of other resources” that are distributed highly unequally; “pluralism is itself implicated in ... being biased in favour of those on the upper end of the spectrum, with no clear justification in their distinguishing between “important” and “unimportant” issues, except from elite standpoint (Cunningham, 2002, 77, 82, 87). Put in more critical terms, they reinforce operating assumptions the resulting construct of power (Marsh, 2002) that often passes for simple empiricism (Cunningham, 2002, 76). Elite representation of various broad interests thus thought to be justified, adequate and efficacious (Cunningham, 2002, 80) and so tends “to slide from a descriptive-explanatory account ... to ... normative” assumptions (Held, 2006, 166, 157) which perform an ideological function (Edelman, 1997, 103). As it was put, “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the ... chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent. Probably 90 per cent of the people cannot get into the ... system” (Schattschneider in Cunningham, 2002, 86).

Given the earlier review of the ISR white papers, it would not be hard to map this broad critique to the identified LIS elite pluralist grouping and leave it at that. But just stenciling this over them to explain the empty calories of the white papers would constitute a partial and unsubtle analysis. Political sociology further extends key insights:

- Elite pluralism is comprised of groups self-organized “to pursue [unique] interests that they share” (Cunningham, 2002, 74, 77). Similarly, LIS elites who speak for the profession are self-authorized, coalescing around “interests, identities, and functions” (Warren, 1993, 227; Warren, 1996). The goal is not power (the ability to

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There is a strong argument that this habit of association is particularly American, and that pluralism’s role in political science is as well (Hindman, 2017; Marsh, 2002; Pasquino, 2015).
coerce) as such, but influence (Marsh, 2002, 20). This maps to the earlier study of the Scholarly Kitchen “chefs” (Buschman, 2020).

• “[N]ot all groups are equal” (Manley, 2003, 387), and so not everyone can be among LIS’ elite pluralists whose influence is enhanced by the “resources controlled,” like foundation grant funding, technical knowledge of the issue at hand, and being in on the locations (“policy networks”) where discussions and decisions are actually made, displaying “clear patterns of inclusion and exclusion” (Marsh, 2002 20, 23, 29, 32; Cunningham, 2002, 77). Access – “the frequency of contacts between interest organizations” and belonging to one – is a key elite distinction (Eising, 2007, 386). Again, this maps to the earlier study (Buschman, 2020).

The analysis of the white papers themselves map to key attributes identified here: claims of a hard-headed empiricism pursued via sponsoring impartial (neutral) investigations, with access to a nexus of resources (staffing, money) prestige and policy locations which enable special knowledge and skilled/imaginative approaches to be deployed.

Conclusion: why the white papers are empty calories

Summing up and concluding, if we return to the points above (knowing the rules of the game, self-authorized, claiming voice, speaking for the profession, specialized knowledge, advantages of unequal resources and access, hard-headed empiricism, neutrality) and the elusory slide into normative judgements, we come to critical political sociology’s conclusions about elite pluralism that empirically fit and explain the empty calories of the fragment of white papers produced by the ISR/LIS elite pluralists. Following the clue gleaned from pandemic guessers, they are a group with interests in weighing in on the issues concerning them: leaders (such as they) are “crucial,” they promote just interests by negotiating among themselves as experts, and the resulting “stability” within LIS is a good in itself (Cunningham, 2002, 80, 83; Held, 2006, 166). LIS elites thus “handle … affairs efficiently with the largely passive approval” of the broader profession (Mara, 2008, 111). Indeed wider participation in decision making is thought neither desirable nor efficacious by elite pluralists (Held, 2006, 209; Cunningham, 2002, 86–87). And so, the white papers are part of a complex process of maintaining [ing] their empirical ‘realist’ credentials while leading “speculation about institutions and … visions” (the white papers) that often just reflect their own values (Cunningham, 2002, 89).

We’ve answered the question of the interests of this grouping, and begun an answer to the why question on these white papers’ empty calories: leading via “incrementalism is [the] rational [path] to change,” not “call[s] for required structural reforms” (Manley, 2003, 389). This particular political sociology itself encourages “moderate attitudes [and] behaviors” and seeks to satisfy “a multiplicity of preference clusters [through] strategies” (Miller, 2003, 134) to maintain position. Our LIS elite pluralists are “much more [prone to] continuity than … change,” effectively reducing professional studies (white papers) and decisioning to economic bargaining among the other elite groupings in and around LIS in the interests of stability (Mara, 2008, 111–112).

Though only a fragment dealing with current questions in academic librarianship, this investigation has provided beginning answers to our questions: 1) Does the empty calories thesis have some empirical basis? 2) If so, how so? 3) Why? A manageable investigation called for a selection method to produce a source of a small set of white papers with an emphasis on a non-profit organization’s imprimatur, recency, topicality and a spread of topics. The white papers were reviewed via a simple discourse analysis in light of their self-described Elements, and a more detailed technical analysis was not required. The current pandemic and analyses/criticisms of predictions led to a return to the white papers: who authored them, and how they are situated in political-sociological terms in LIS discourse? The findings fit with earlier analyses, suggesting much about prestige in LIS and how that is maintained, how practices are (and are not) formulated and what to do with the white papers.

The claim here is not that all such documents are empty calories, but some (or many) are. Nor is this a cynical conclusion that “it is always happy hour for [those] with money, knowledge and power” as it was put (Marsh, 2002, 14). Rather, a follow up analysis shows that, under the forces of relentless economic rationalization (a.k.a. neoliberalism), our LIS elite pluralists – administrators and those who “handle, treat, distribute, sometimes create [and] add value along the way” to professional knowledge and practices – are under pressure themselves: “the work privileges of educated workers are [themselves being] eroded” (Winter, 2009, 157, 156–161). This too fits the pandemic-guessing example, as well as the political-sociological analysis of the “chefs” cited earlier: “Theirs is a … difficult task…. [T]hey must perform acts of divination about the scholarly publishing landscape … to maintain their elite leadership position and, not least, the grants and consultancies that underwrite these activities. … They must be ahead of the curve but not too far ahead of the curve, and their influence is meant not merely for publishers and technologists but for the greater mass of LIS … because it is there that so much of the financial infrastructure” resides (Buschman, 2020, 307). Political sociology provides an analytical path to explaining why the white papers produced by the ISR elite pluralists are empty calories: continuity, smooth bargaining, moderate attitudes and behaviors, and seeking to satisfy a multiplicity of preference clusters through strategies in their positional and professional interests. Making clear recommendations and claims in the white papers: not so much. More study of the questions is, perhaps, the point. It is reminiscent of an old joke: What does a lawyer always recommend? Answer: More lawyer. As with the “chefs” and the early definition of LIS elites, prestige is maintained by close association with resources (grants) and access to where decisions are made (publishers, foundations) to steer how practices are (and are not) formulated. A sympathetic reading would highlight the terribly delicate balancing act between wildly varying interests that are growing no closer in this work. A less sympathetic one would point to an inside track on more than four million dollars per year of scarce LIS grant funding going toward producing the empty calories of white papers that are produced largely - if perhaps not exclusively – in maintaining positioning.

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