

disaggregated realm of alternative information.

The People's Library is an example of a community led, grassroots project to make information available during a time of political upheaval. During the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests, the People's Library began as a small collection of donated books on a table in the northeast corner of Liberty Plaza and grew to incorporate zines, pamphlets, and alternative newspapers. The library in many ways embodied the anti-neoliberal ideology and feelings of disenfranchisement at the heart of the occupation; this was only catalyzed when the original People's Library was largely destroyed by the NYPD. The People's Library wasn't only a symbol: it was a space where information and ideas could be shared, where questions might be answered, and eventually where the growing collection of material about OWS might begin to be aggregated.

The Lesbian Herstory Archive, an independent archive in Brooklyn, houses the world's largest collection of materials by and about lesbians and their community. The archive began in the mid 1970s after educators who were involved in the Gay Academic Union felt a need for a safe space for women to confront the "precariousness of lesbian culture and how so much of our past culture was seen only through patriarchal eyes" even within the gay liberation movement. The purpose of LHA is "to gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities so that future generations will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives."

Learn More:

<http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/>

<https://peopleslibrary.wordpress.com/history/>

<https://zines.barnard.edu/zine-libraries>

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## Referencing Revolution: Information Access and Activism



a zine to go along with the mini-exhibition of the same name at Interference Archive, as part of We Are What We Archive, September 29, 2016 – January 15, 2017.

Text by Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida

**Information helps us define ourselves and our place in the world.** When we talk about our “information society”, we take for granted the ubiquity of information coming at us from all angles. And yet the constant landslide of data and noise spewing at us from computers in our pockets and televisions on our treadmills hides the fact that not everyone gets to have all this info, and the information we see is not all the information we need.

This exhibition is about the work of people who want to change the way we access and use information. Some of these people might call themselves “information professionals” -- librarians, archivists, information technologists, and more. Some work in rooms full of books; others work in rooms full of computers. They may have gotten a university degree in information studies; they might call themselves activists. All of them are thinking critically about information access and use.

Defining the scope of “information activism” is not for the faint of heart. This exhibition reflects largely on the work of people who would admit that they are information professionals, but even that term is hazy when we reflect on who has the right to call themselves a “professional”. We have decided to focus largely on individuals and groups who are working within the broad arenas of archives and libraries, while also recognizing those who ensure we have open channels to discover and access information.

Like any results page in your search engine of choice, this exhibition is only a starting point. It represents things we’ve been talking about and inspired by, but leaves out many things we wish we could share. What you see on the walls here is fairly New York-focused; this archive is in New York, and this wall space is limited. Nevertheless, we’re excited for this opportunity to start a conversation. Let us know what we’ve forgotten, as well as what you’ve been working on.

### **Creating our place: forming our identity**

Within the profession of “information workers”, groups like the American Library Association or the Society of American Archivists take a role in shaping identity. They also tackle issues around censorship, information access, and more. Yet the entities that represent us don’t always fit our conceptions of who we are and the

education movement.

Providing access to information and protecting individual privacy rights are core professional values of librarians; the American Library Association includes freedom from censorship, the right to free expression, and free access to ideas in their Bill of Rights. Information professionals have been some of the loudest critics of the US Patriot Act and vociferous advocates for digital privacy. Organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation have been involved in net neutrality lobbying and personal data privacy practices like those advocated by the Library Freedom Project; these have been adopted by individuals and public libraries nationwide. Informational professionals have created a robust open access infrastructure that allows for knowledge sharing.

Learn More:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/librarians-versus-nsa/>  
<https://libraryfreedomproject.org/> and <https://www.torproject.org/>  
<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>  
<https://www.eff.org/> <http://sparcopen.org/open-access/>  
<http://www.bklynlibrary.org/media/press/bpl-focuses-digital-privacy-0>  
<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2008/09/americas-most-dangerous-librarians>

### **Alternative voices: Occupying our space**

Information has the power to shape belief systems, to reify cultural norms, and to inform political and societal reality. How can information activists shape the ways knowledge is produced, distributed, and contextualized? How do we ensure that alternative histories and ideologies are documented, collected, and made publically available?

Alternative presses and zines capture voices that might not otherwise be heard. Alternative libraries and archives like the Lesbian Herstory Archive and Interference Archive; infoshops, counter information networks and community bookstores; and even alternative collections like the Emma Goldman Papers and the Labadie Collection that are housed within mainstream institutions fill a need by representing alternative cultural and political viewpoints. The indie-information landscape is vast and varied and the ephemera included here is merely a snapshot of the towering and

Activist Sanford Berman is a radical cataloging librarian who advocates for reforms to existing authorities. He is most famous for his tireless campaign to revise and add to the Library of Congress Subject Headings. Berman's work continues to inspire generations of catalogers to think outside the rules. He leads us to related conversations and campaigns regarding the way we describe material: are standard fields for title, author, and subject the most relevant way to catalog every item that crosses our library desks?

### **The Politics of Information: Net neutrality, the digital divide, digital privacy, and open access**

Information workers occupy a central role in debates around the way we access and interact with information online. This stems from a recognition that our capacity to stay informed is deeply affected by internet policy and economics.

Net neutrality is the practice of treating all data on the internet equitably. Advocates believe that governments and internet service providers should not discriminate or charge different access rates by user, content, website, platform, application, equipment, or mode of communication.

“Digital divide” describes the schism that exists between those who do and do not have regular access to digital information or reliable connectivity. Typically framed as a socio-economic disparity, the digital divide disproportionately affects minority and rural populations.

Digital privacy concerns the surveillance of individuals by governments and corporations. Privacy has been problematically framed in direct opposition to national security, even as federal data hacks illustrate the vulnerability of digital data stored in government databases. Information activists work to reveal digital privacy as the social concern it really is.

Open access strives to make information freely available online. It can be applied to all forms of research including data, peer-reviewed and non peer-reviewed academic journal articles, conference papers, theses, book chapters, and monographs. Open access is closely related to government transparency initiatives, open source technology, crowdsourcing culture, and the open

work we strive to do. Information workers around the world have created organizations and networks for representing our values, sharing the conversations we want to have, and ultimately helping us accomplish the work we hope to achieve.

Under the George W. Bush administration, Librarians Against Bush came together to voice their concern about the Bush administration's policies and its impact on civil liberties, privacy, and intellectual freedom, taking part in political events including the 2004 RNC Convention.

Radical Reference is a collective of volunteer information workers who believe in social justice and equality. RadRef emerged around the 2004 RNC Convention in New York to provide street reference services to activists and organizers of any political leaning. From this starting point, local collectives have spun off across the globe. RadRefers answered reference questions through their website from 2006 to 2013, and continue to connect information activists at the local level.

In New York City, groups like The Desk Set have focused on bringing librarians together to build relationships and have fun, but also to provide solidarity and support for organizations such as the Transgender Foundation Archives and Library, Books through Bars, the Lesbian Herstory Archive, and Literature for Incarcerated Teens.

Learn more:

<http://thedeskset.org/>

<http://radicalreference.info/>

### **Working in solidarity**

How can the information profession work in solidarity with projects around the globe? While many groups ship books or computers as “charity projects” to people and places that don't have these things, the groups depicted here have worked alongside social justice activism in other parts of the world.

As a growing network of information workers, Librarians and Archivists with Palestine (LAP) has organized two delegations to Palestine since 2013, meeting with local libraries and archives to learn about and work together on the issues that they are grappling

with: access to Arabic-language literature; open access publishing; cataloging and classification; acquisitions and collection building, and more. LAP has raised money to bring Palestinian librarians to present at the American Library Association conference, and organized the “One Book, Many Communities” program.

In 2014, a group of librarians and technologists traveled to Port-au-Prince to meet with local organizations that focus on human rights, education, and literacy. This small delegation created ties between people in the U.S. and Haiti who do digital activism, community librarianship, and queer advocacy.

Librarians Without Borders partners with the Miguel Angel Asturias Academy in Que-tzal-te-nango, Guatemala, and with Libraries Across Africa. Students currently enrolled in library education programs, as well as professionals working in the field, have travelled to work with these organizations in support of their efforts and to share ideas with each other about the problems we face as information professionals around the world.

Learn more:

<http://librarianswithpalestine.org/>

<http://lwb-online.org/>

Read Strategies for Engaging in International Librarianship: Misconceptions and Opportunities by Melanie Sellars

## Thinking critically

Critical Librarianship (or #critlib) is a loose community of librarians and activists who are committed to bringing social justice principles into library work. With roots in critical theory (including gender and feminist studies) and critical pedagogy, the #critlib movement started as a conversation on Twitter in 2014.

The #critlib hashtag soon became synonymous with a space to examine how library work can subvert implicit inequalities in our communities and educational systems. Since 2014, #critlib has gained considerable cultural traction. Some argue that the movement, which is increasingly represented at many library conferences and in professional literature, is either elitist or has effectively infiltrated mainstream conversations about librarianship. Others argue that #critlib has gained cultural traction because the

current political and social climate in America has forced social justice issues to the forefront of conversations about information access and education.

In response to structural inequities and the implicitly marginalizing forces that exist in our communities and institutions, critical librarians have fostered alternative platforms for information professionals and activists to collaborate and communicate. Critical librarians have organized unconferences and workshops and have edited publications including *Radical Teacher* and the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Literacy*, as well as books like *Critical Library Instruction* (2010). The bi-weekly #critlib twitter chats have touched upon a range of topics from serving homeless library patrons to diversifying library collections to the recent attempt at union busting by administrators at the Long Island University.

Learn more:

<http://critlib.org/>

<https://twitter.com/hashtag/critlib>

## Calling it: describing our world and ourselves

When we catalog material in archives and libraries we hope this will make it easier for people to find and access these collections, but choosing words to describe books and artifacts impacts who will discover them when searching the library catalog. How we describe things both reflects and shapes the way we and others see the world.

Lists of terms referred to as “authorities”, as well as descriptive metadata standards for the types of information we should include in a catalog record, ensure we use the same words and phrases to describe the same types of material. These authorities also help us recognize, for example, that when we search for Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, we should “see also” Lewis Carroll if we wish to truly go down the rabbit hole. But decisions about which words are the best and most useful terms make assumptions about who will be searching and what their terminology preferences are. Authorities also reveal the gaps of what we haven’t bothered to create standard terms for -- the people, groups, and ideas that aren’t important enough for inclusion in an approved vocabulary.