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Library Research for the 99%: Reaching Out to the Occupy Wall Street Movement

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Abstract

This article describes how librarians from three different universities in the greater New York area came together through the myMETRO Researchers Project to reach out to Occupy Wall Street. Using social media and free online tools to partner with Occupy's environmental subgroup, the authors overcame proprietary roadblocks, copyright challenges, and distrust/skepticism to discover the authentic information needs of activists and compile an annotated bibliography of scholarly research on the real-world impacts of climate change. This successful collaboration is an example of how institutions can be used as contact points through which individuals can affect change on society, and how librarians can partner with local community groups to combat information poverty and digital divides and promote open access and knowledge-sharing.

Keywords: outreach; social activism; equitable access; digital divide; open access; radical reference

Introduction

How can citizens without access to specialized scholarly information confront misinformation and misrepresentation in their communities? How can libraries be involved more directly in the social movements of our time? This article tells the tale of how we, three librarians from three different institutions, were brought together by the Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO) to participate in an outreach project offering research help to a local community in need. According to the organization's call for participants, the myMETRO Researchers Pilot Project was designed to give librarians in the greater New York City area an opportunity to work in teams to "gain experience [researching] a cutting edge topic, make contacts outside the library world, and create a positive and helpful impression about librarians" (T. Nielsen, personal communication, December 26, 2012). Our trio chose a recently-established community which had captured international attention: Occupy Wall Street (OWS). Using free online collaboration tools and social media (including Google Hangouts, Google Groups, and Zotero) to partner with members of the environmental subgroup of Occupy Wall Street, our group overcame distance, proprietary roadblocks (copyright), and skepticism to discover the authentic information needs of activists. We compiled a freely accessible, online annotated bibliography of scholarly research on the real-world impacts of climate change. This project explores the possibilities and limitations of a "library without borders," and confronts issues of open access scholarship, open source communication, information poverty, and the digital divide.

In her keynote at the 2013 LACUNY Institute, speaker Christine Pawley (2013) noted that institutions and organizations act as points of connection between individuals and larger social powers, just as texts act as points of intersection between readers and writers. Occupy Wall Street and the Metropolitan New York Library Council can both be seen as connection points where individuals come together to accomplish broader goals within society. Although OWS and METRO have very different missions and structures, it was through the conduit of these two organizations that we, as individual librarians, were able to connect and partner with individuals from the OWS Eco-Cluster. The organizational structures provided by Occupy and METRO endowed individual librarians and activists with a sense of authority, identity, and common purpose that gave us entrée into conversations, partnerships, and social actions we might never have engaged in alone. As we describe the successful collaboration between OWS and METRO, we want to invoke Pawley's framework to empower individual librarians to reach out to members of their communities and to use local organizations or institutions as points of contact through which individuals come together to enact change.

Reaching Out

Because the Occupy Movement is impressively vast, loosely organized, and non-hierarchical by design, we were unsure at first how to reach those members of OWS

most likely to benefit from our services. Initially, we attended the Making Worlds Forum on the Commons,¹ went to an Occupy Wall Street panel at ALA Midwinter 2012, and visited a bookstore whose owner had offered to house the People's Library following the Zuccotti Park raid in November 2011 (McVeigh, 2011). At these events, we offered our business cards and "librarian services" to anyone who was interested. At first, we encountered some skepticism and mistrust on the Occupiers' part, as they had recently experienced police infiltration and were involved in an ongoing lawsuit against the NYPD over the destruction of books in the People's Library. The lawsuit was eventually settled out of court with damages awarded to the People's Library in April 2013 (Moynihan, 2013). When we finally met with someone from the People's Library at an informal OWS potluck, we were told others would speak with us once we had been vetted. Our initial meeting was, therefore, something of a screening. The backing and reputation of METRO helped us demonstrate our trustworthiness and begin a working relationship with OWS.

At the same dinner meeting, we made contact with the environmental subgroup of OWS, the Eco-Cluster. Eco-cluster members greeted our offer of help enthusiastically, but it took ongoing conversations to determine their research needs. Eventually, we posted a survey on the Eco-Cluster's very active Google Groups forum. We received a substantive research suggestion from a member of Occupy Oakland who sought research that would make the local, regional, and national consequences of climate change relevant to everyday people in preparation for Connect the Dots Climate Impacts Day,² a nationwide environmental advocacy event held on May 5, 2012. As academic librarians, we had access to scholarly environmental science databases that members of the Eco-Cluster did not. Using Zotero³ to collect and share citations, we compiled an annotated bibliography⁴ of over 100 sources related to specific impacts of climate change, including: receding forests in the Northwest, wildfires in the Southwest, extreme weather and natural disasters on the East Coast, and the economic and human health consequences of global warming. Our annotations summarized each article, highlighted potentially useful facts, evaluated the article's relevance, and gauged its level of difficulty. The bibliography was delivered to the Eco-Cluster in time for a protest at the United Nations Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development⁵ on June 20, 2012.

Results and Discussion

¹ See <http://occupywallst.org/article/making-worlds/>

² See <http://www.climatedots.org/>

³ See <http://www.zotero.org>

⁴ Our completed project, "Climate Change Impacts: An Annotated Bibliography for Occupy Wall Street" is available for anyone to view online via Google Docs at <http://tinyurl.com/MyMetrOWSAnnotatedBib>

⁵ See <http://www.un.org/en/sustainablefuture/about.shtml>

After we shared our annotated bibliography via the Eco-Cluster's Google Group, we received many messages expressing gratitude. Some responders suggested ideas for further research and new partnerships. One positive response came from a Brooklyn-based environmental group:

Our group, Climate Action/Brooklyn For Peace, wants to start doing "impact of climate change on different neighborhoods" outreach and education, so this [research] will be very useful... Thank you thank you thank you. We love librarians! (Climate Action, personal communication, June 21, 2012)

While the reception was overwhelmingly positive, the further we delved into this collaborative research endeavor, the more we encountered frustrations with resources rendered inaccessible or unshareable by copyright restrictions, embargoes, or databases that were not compatible with Zotero. We were careful not to violate copyright law or our libraries' contracts with database vendors, but what was merely a practical annoyance for us presented a real barrier to access for activists unaffiliated with a university library. Copyright law clearly precluded us from distributing the full-text of articles obtained through subscription databases to OWS. But does fair use play a role when librarians are sharing resources amongst ourselves, for educational and scholarly purposes? Digital rights management software often answered this nebulous question for us; pdfs from proprietary databases that one of us would share in Zotero disappeared over time or were unable to be opened by the other two librarians because their libraries' journal subscriptions differed in coverage or had blackout dates for the most current issues.

Our experience demonstrates how barriers to information access can also be barriers to social and scientific progress. The lack of open access to most scholarly, scientific journals ultimately undermines the utility of our annotated bibliography. In our online bibliography, we informed readers how to obtain commercial database articles using public or local university libraries; however, it remained unclear whether Occupiers would be willing or able to track down these citations on their own. We were heartened by activist Peter Rugh's socially-minded discussion of our project on his environmental blog *Ear to Earth*:

What MyMetro Researchers have handed grassroots campaigners is a compendium of information that would be tricky for the general public to track down using a common search engine...Now, the impetus is on [OWS], and anyone concerned about climate change and its impact really, to take the information Angie, Darcy, and ArieH provided and put it to use. (Rugh, 2012)

Rugh's call for activists to put research into practice and his assertion that the myMETRO Researchers Project aided Occupiers in resource-discovery are deeply

validating. Yet in an information-driven political-economy, we must also acknowledge that mere discovery of resources means very little without the ability to easily access them. Foucault (1975/2012) wrote that “the formation of knowledge and the increase of power regularly reinforce one another” (p. 505). Conversely, it can be said that the *deprivation* of formulated knowledge reinforces a *decrease* of power—the power to prove one’s point with empirical evidence, to get the attention of the busy, distracted majorities of the world, to prove that the effects of climate change are real and verified by disinterested scientists, to use convincing statistics to push leaders for socioeconomic reforms.⁶ In an Information Age where the volume of knowledge increases with exponential speed, only those with access to high-quality, timely research are able to speak with the privileged voice of the informed. Viewed with a wider lens, our outreach project has highlighted the need for more open access and information-sharing, and less information-hoarding in proprietary, corporate-influenced silos.

Conclusion

The Occupy Wall Street movement sought to challenge the uncapped growth of socioeconomic inequalities on a national stage. Our collaboration with OWS brings to light inequalities between the information rich and the information poor. People with access to vast quantities of proprietary, cutting-edge information—university students, researchers, lawyers, investors, or private firms able to afford expensive databases—have distinct social and political advantages over the information impoverished—private citizens unaffiliated with a research institution who, outside of public libraries, may have limited access to broadband Internet, let alone proprietary scholarly databases and publications.⁷

Increasing access and bridging digital divides takes time, but it can be done effectively by a small number of motivated, individual librarians, especially when they creatively use existing organizations as support structures and conversation-starters. As we learned in completing our annotated bibliography on climate change, a little bit of work can result in a big payoff. An outreach project can grow as large or as small as the librarians and their community partners decide. The collaboration between Occupy Wall Street’s Eco-Cluster and the myMetro Researchers Project shows that, through organizations, individuals can come

⁶ As Frederic Jameson theorizes in *Cognitive Mapping*, under global corporate capitalism there are “enormous strategic and tactical difficulties of coordinating local and grassroots or neighborhood political actions with national or international ones, such as urgent political dilemmas” (1988/2012, pp. 470-471).

⁷ Because of the difficulty of charting one’s individual relative social position with regard to structures such as access to information, the “information poor” may not be conscious of any hardship.

together in spite of economic, cultural, and physical divides to combat information poverty and advance social change, one step at a time.

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