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Grinding the Gears: Academic Librarians and Civic Responsibility

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Abstract

Corporate encroachments are transforming universities into edu-factories which are designed to produce servants of the state rather than engaged citizens. Academic librarians have a duty to resist the machineries of the institution. This panel will survey the revolutionary potential inherent in the open source movement, feminist porn collections, and critical information literacy.

Keywords: open source; personal libraries; special collections; collection building; politics of knowledge production; critical information literacy; Occupy Movement; feminist porn; *calibre*

Introduction

As academic librarians interested in critical approaches to information studies, we increasingly wonder whether it is enough to expose people to information, or to merely give them the necessary research database training for academic success. What happens to our students when they leave the university or college setting? How might we enable them to consume, produce and analyse information in an increasingly politically charged information landscape throughout their whole lives? How might we help create the conditions possible for our students to confront social, economic and political issues as they happen and once they leave us? All three authors of this paper address these questions through different mechanisms: the development of open source tools, the building of subversive collections, and the programming of critical information literacy events in the library. While we use different approaches in taking up these issues in our work, our goal is the same—to foster civic engagement and citizenship in our urban library communities.

Another common thread in our work is an increasing sense that libraries and librarians need a divorce. We worry that the institutional values of the academic

library inside the neoliberal university are at odds with the professional ethics of librarianship. And we believe that we must acknowledge this more openly in our work and think about how to subvert the growing corporatization of higher education, individually, in our own praxis, and collectively, as a profession. The following transcripts of our talks at the LACUNY 2013 *Libraries and the Right to the City* conference will explore three different projects which push back against the embrace of the neoliberal incursion into the daily practice of academic librarianship and work to engage our communities in various forms of resistance.

Every Person, A Library

Mita Williams

Increasingly, academic libraries offer less space to print journals and books. As information is being transmuted into digital forms, the work involved in providing access to our collections is now something that we have largely outsourced and pay others to do for us from a server somewhere in the clouds. For many of our readers, the library has become not so much of a place but of a border between territories. Librarians, as such, have become border guards. “Give me a proper ID and password, and I will allow you to pass into the lands of JSTOR. *Papers please.*”

So consider this: we are no longer a space. We are a point of access. In response, many libraries have invested in their spaces so that they can become a stronger collection of...people. Libraries have invested in more comfortable chairs, group study areas, collaborative working zones, and even media and technology labs. It’s as if libraries have been turned inside out.

But, a library has to be more than a chair, a table, a whiteboard, WiFi access, and a power outlet. Doesn’t it? And, a librarian’s work should be more about sharing than excluding, right?

So I’m going to lay a path to a still unknown territory that I think is worth exploring. I’m going to suggest that we give our each of our readers their own library system. To explain this proposal properly, I will leave the metaphor behind for a moment.

I have, on my personal laptop an Integrated Library System or ILS. Specifically, it is the OPAC module of Evergreen (www.open-ils.org). Evergreen is one of the two most popular Open Source integrated library systems in the world, with the other being Koha (koha-community.org).

It’s on my laptop because, for a brief time, I was trying to help out with local development of this software. However, I stopped doing this labour once my library administration—in the pursuit of efficiency over autonomy and resilience—decided to

put out an RFP for a new integrated, vendor-provided, cloud-based ILS. There is much that I could say about this decision and how it was made but for this piece, I want to concentrate attention onto one simple idea: no matter what the outcome of my institution's choice of an ILS, I will still have the Evergreen code on my laptop.

Most of our library systems are now managed by venture capital firms. Ex-Libris is owned by Golden Gate Capital. SirsiDynix is owned by Vista Equity Partners. Innovative Interfaces is owned by Huntsman Gay Global Capital and JMI Equity. The corporate encroachment of this space is very troubling and it is almost complete. It is corporations who now control the relevance rankings that determine what content gets discovered in our collections. It is corporations who now decide which features of the digital library are worth developing. It is corporations that we will have to negotiate with to get our *own* item, holding, and patron records transferred back to us if we want use another system.

We need to build our library systems with open source software precisely because such systems will not go away when a corporation decides that they are no longer profitable to run.

We must recognize that most library administrations have chosen not to take responsibility for the intellectual work behind the very systems that make a library successfully function. I'm not actually suggesting that we ask our users to install a Koha or the Evergreen ILS on their computers. Instead, I am suggesting that every reader of electronic text—especially librarians—should install another piece of open source software. It's called *calibre* (calibre-ebook.com).

calibre is a free and open source e-book library management application that was developed by the “readers” of e-books. Not only does *calibre* help you organize and explore your own e-book collection, it also includes an e-book file convertor, an e-book reader, and an RSS-to-e-book fetcher.

I gave a talk in March of 2013 to my local hackerspace about “mobile libraries” and asked the audience of fifty or so how many of them use *calibre*. I was shocked to see that about a quarter did. One young man said that he used *calibre* to organize his 6000 books. Just like a librarian, he used the software to clean up and supplement the metadata of his collection. And, he also used *calibre* to share some of his books with his friends.

It shouldn't be surprising that our readers have their own online libraries. E-readers—like the Kindle and the Nook—are not just readers but small personal libraries unto themselves. As we know with e-book readers, the option to share locally and responsibly has been not developed.

One of the least understood and thus least appreciated functions of *calibre* is that it uses the Open Publication Distribution System (OPDS) standard (opds-spec.org) to allow one to easily share e-books (at least those without Digital Rights Management software installed) to e-readers on the same local network. For example, on my iPod Touch, I have the e-reader program Stanza (itunes.apple.com/us/app/stanza/id284956128) installed and from it, I can access the *calibre* library catalogue on my laptop from within my house, since both are on the same local WiFi network. And so can anyone else in my family from their own mobile device. It's worth noting that Stanza was bought by Amazon in 2011 and according to those who follow the digital e-reader market, it appears that Amazon may have done so solely for the purpose of stunting its development and sunseting the software (Hoffelder, 2013).

We can't trust Amazon to put the rights of readers first. Can we expect our Integrated Library Systems to do the same? Without a confident answer to that question, I believe that we—librarians—need to help support and develop open source library systems—for our institutions, for our communities, and for our readers. We need technology built for sharing. Let's help people build their own libraries. And, then let every reader be a point of light by which others may read by.

Desire in the Stacks: Collecting Subversively

Lisa Sloniowski

My focus is on what I call “subversive library collections” but my talk has to be framed by an awareness of the problem that however subversively we might collect, increasingly, access to our collections is made available only to our own gated academic community. Mita and I share an interest in open access digital collection building, in part because my belief is that academic libraries have an obligation to expose our collections to the widest possible audience, rather than selling them up to the highest bidder.

That being said, I think we first have an obligation to reach out to marginalized communities and preserve their archives, and build library collections which help narrate their stories in ways which challenge dominant historical narratives and allow for the possibility of new readings and contextualizations. Our goal should be to be a people's archive. We should build and preserve the collections that Google won't. In Canada, this imperative is becoming all the more pressing as our conservative federal government is currently gutting our national library and archives with budget cuts and layoffs, engendering deep worries about the future of our unique collective heritage (Canadian Association of University Teachers, n.d.).

My particular research interest lies in feminist and queer communities and collections. Today, I'm going to focus on one of my projects, the Feminist Porn Archive and Research Project (FPARP). FPARP is federally funded by Canada's Social and Sciences and Humanities Council and I am a co-investigator on this project, alongside the principal investigator, Professor Bobby Noble, also at York University. I became interested in this topic when I realized there were at least 40 years of cultural production of feminist porn, and hardly any institutional library had been collecting it, preferring instead to collect material from the anti-porn side of a feminist debate about pornography. As I learned more, I realized these films were often in conversation with ideas from the notorious sex wars in the feminist community and that the films themselves often operate as an archive of feminist and queer sexual practices—making them a particularly valuable knowledge source about topics shrouded in mystery, misinterpretation, and fear.

As we started to explore adding this material to our collection at York, it became clear that feminist porn collections create an opportunity to investigate the ways in which our libraries and archives ignore the lessons of feminist epistemology as well as the voices of queer counter publics, and actively collude in historical erasures. As Marcel Barriault (2009) insists, “how do we ensure archives as bodies of knowledge also have knowledge of bodies?”

So, our research team is investigating the way that history, as well as the history of sexuality, emergent queer, feminist and transgender social movements, in the last 40 years of the twentieth-century, have been mirrored, analyzed, documented and modified in pornography as an archive of memory, as well as through its means of production, and dissemination. Additionally, we will investigate the ways in which feminist pornography can or cannot be meaningfully incorporated into existing technologies and methodologies of archiving in order to expose and challenge barriers to long term scholarly access and preservation of this body of work, and, indeed, to feminist and/or sexually explicit material, in general.

One of the first questions I am always asked when talking about this project is to define feminist porn, a juxtaposition of words that seems impossible at best. However, it is the very unmooring of the word “feminist” from the anti-porn movement that drives this form of cultural production and indeed our project itself. In many ways we are less interested in what feminist porn ‘is’ than in what it ‘does.’ We see it as an interdisciplinary set of multiple genres (not just film), each of which functions as a historical warehouse of images, debates, and cultural memory, as well as important sites for the establishment, modification, preservation, and investigation of feminist sexual-cultural practice.

On a very practical level, however, for the moment we are working with the same definition used by the jury of the annual Feminist Porn Awards in Toronto, which suggest that the item must meet at least two of the following criteria:

1. Women and/or traditionally marginalized people were involved in the direction, production and/or conception of the work.
2. The work depicts genuine pleasure, agency and desire for all performers, especially women and traditionally marginalized people.
3. The work expands the boundaries of sexual representation on film, challenges stereotypes and presents a vision that sets the content apart from most mainstream pornography. This may include depicting a diversity of desires, types of people, bodies, sexual practices, and/or an anti-racist or anti-oppression framework throughout the production. (Good For Her, n.d.)

Some of the emerging problems and research questions of our project include issues of collection development and canonization, accessibility, copyright, the potential reaction of our anti-porn feminist colleagues, and the comfort levels of staff. Also, we are particularly concerned about issues of classification—how do we develop feminist and scholarly taxonomies for this material which also respects the play of bodies, sexualities and genders at work within this form of cultural production? How might we recognize pornography itself as a form of cultural production, not only as a “social problem” as suggested by the Library of Congress subject headings?

Archivist Terry Cook (2001) would like us to work harder as a profession to make transparent the ways in which archival appraisal, arrangement, and description is an act of historically and socially situated interpretation and narration. Hope Olson (2007) cautions us to be aware of the ways in which cataloging practices construct subjects. One might argue that feminist porn deliberately “queers the categories”—offering a new type of text which resists being fixed within any of the existing descriptive categories of mainstream porn or archival and library descriptions. Hence, our struggles to define and categorize it lay bare the interpretive dance of cataloging and ideologies at play within our work—thus making it necessary as feminist activists and librarians/archivists to document our struggles and effect change. Cataloging is a practice which renders knowledge visible. The absence of taxonomy for porn, and the absence of feminist porn in our collections, maintains the distinction between public and private spheres and forces intimate relations into a locked archival cage. FPARP seeks to unlock this cage. According to scholars Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “queer social theory is committed to sexuality as an inescapable category of analysis, agitation, and refunctioning” (1998). How might we similarly commit the library to this analytic project and begin therefore to render desire, especially feminist and queer desire, visible inside institutional collections? What institutional and social ruptures would such visibility engender?

Occupying Information Literacy

Patti Ryan

It is November 1, 2011. The Occupy Movement is in full swing, and sites have been set up in 150 cities around the world. As protestors spend their 16th consecutive day in a downtown Toronto park, a group of York University students gather in the sprawling atrium of the Scott Library, in the city's north end. Some have arrived early, eager to speak passionately about "Why Occupy Matters" and "What Is To Be Done." Some have come with forceful critiques of the movement—to speak of its insularity, its lack of attention to marginalized groups, and to the reports of sexual violence at Occupy sites.

Some have simply stopped on route to somewhere else, noticing the circle and its energy. But, most, it seems, have come to listen, and to learn more about how and why Occupy matters to them, and to their lives. The dialogue begins, tentatively at first, and slowly gains ground—stories emerge, emotions surface, and voices rise and fall and compete with the ambient noise of the library's traffic. For two hours, the group explores—together—the contours of a single question: *What exactly is Occupy?*

Over a year later, as we continue to assess the social impact of Occupy, this event might be seen as a small, contained intervention. It was a knowledge sharing circle, organized by two academic librarians on a shoestring budget and with limited preparation. Yet, against a backdrop of a scholarship of information literacy (IL), which has tended to accommodate, rather than confront, a neoliberal shift in higher education, and in learning itself, we might envision this event as a small step in the development of a critical, even radical, information literacy praxis which seeks to counter what Henry Giroux (2010) has called the "bare pedagogy" of higher education.

The Occupy event at York Libraries was the centerpiece of an attempt by Lisa Sloniowski and myself to more formally theorize our IL practice and move issues of social justice to the center of our teaching. Inspired in part by the Iraq war teach-in which Lisa and Mita organized at the University of Windsor in 2003, we began to dig deeply into the body of work that calls for critical engagement with our assumptions about IL, and began to plan extra-curricular IL events that we hoped would engage our community in dialogues on social issues. Our goal was to develop workshops that would, we hoped, create opportunities for students to connect their classroom learning to the world around them—to make IL "embodied, situated, and social" (Jacobs, 2008). We gave the project a name—*Research for Citizenship*—and set up a blog to keep track of ideas about the role of libraries and librarians in creating spaces of resistance.

In this short time, I'll say just two things about the way that this kind of programming can challenge the neoliberal imperatives that are re-fashioning higher education from a public good into training for the marketplace.

First, we intentionally framed the event around a single open-ended question. While we did think carefully ahead of time about the information issues arising from Occupy, and prepared an online Occupy Research Guide, we resisted our impulse to over-prepare and approached the event as learners ourselves. Although we recognized that we had information to share, so, too, did others in our community. In taking this approach, we tried to counter the transactional model of education that so often takes place in our 50 minute IL sessions. We tried to model IL as a lifelong and inherently social process, rather than a commodity to be acquired.

Second, in inviting students to explore the contours of the Occupy Movement with us, we hoped it would empower them to go beyond merely being aware of, or recognizing, as expressed in Standard Five of the ACRL Standards for IL, “many of the economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use of information.” We hoped to make space for our community to participate in discussion and decision-making around social practices. In this, we took our theoretical cues from the thoughtful questions posed by Jeff Lilburn (2007) in his work on media literacy. He asks us to consider whether the concept of “informed citizenry,” as embodied by the Standards, merely means allegiance and compliance with social norms—what Giroux has called “patriotic correctness.” We asked, and continue to ask, how we might do more than teach our students how to work around conditions that impose barriers to access—for example, by including alternative sources of information on our Occupy Research Guide. How might we work with our community to confront these very conditions? So, needless to say, we were delighted to see a number of students gather after the event to start a mailing list for further action, and even more pleased when we were later invited by a student group to attend a follow-up event on Occupy.

Ultimately, we view this kind of IL work as a way for academic librarians to build community activism in the face of the increasing corporatization of our institutions, of our learning spaces, and of our libraries. As our institutions push us towards the “flexible and innovative” solutions of online learning, compel us to spend more of our limited classroom time gathering data for assessment, and marketing the information tools we rent and encourage students to consume, we can, as librarians, who are often at odds with the neoliberal logic of the 21st century library, use our academic freedom to make small but meaningful interventions. And in doing so, we equip ourselves to think more broadly about our own professional and personal acts of political practice and how they resist or support the bare pedagogy of our time.

Conclusion

These three seemingly disparate explorations of open source tools, subversive collection practices, and critical information literacy are connected by our shared

awareness that our most important role as academic librarians is to build the conditions and opportunities that allow our communities to come together to explore and confront social problems, and to examine collectively the ways in which neoliberal impulses are an anathema to the traditional ethics and practices of librarianship. In doing so, we build solidarity with our communities, and find allies with which to confront wider battles for social and political change for a more just world. Engaging in these multiple paths of resistance can also help to move us towards a more critically reflective praxis that gives primacy to cultivating an engaged and empowered citizenry while simultaneously challenging the corporate stranglehold over access to information. As academic librarians, we work for our communities, not our institutions. And if we find that we don't, it is incumbent on us—as librarians—to envision our alternatives. Another library is possible.

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