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Occupy Wall Street and the Myth of Technological Death of the Library

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Occupy Wall Street and the Myth of Technological Death of the Library

Abstract

Within a week of the emergence of Occupy Wall Street, a library surfaced in the midst of the protest. Staffed by volunteers and comprised entirely of donated materials, the People's Library offers books and media to the public, provides basic reference assistance and has built an online catalog of their holdings. In this paper, I analyze the People's Library in terms of larger discussions of libraries, technology and activism. Drawing on personal experiences volunteering at the Library as well as text from the Library's blog, I argue that the People's Library offers two counter arguments to conventional claims about the public library: first, that libraries are being existentially threatened by the emergence of digital technologies and second, that a library's institutional ethics are located solely or predominantly in the content of its collection. Using the People's Library as a kind of conceptual case study, I explore the connections between public libraries, digital technologies and activist ideologies.

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Introduction

It has become something of a journalistic pastime to mourn the decline of the library (*e.g.*, Lloyd, 2010; Meyer, 2008; Nichols, 2010). Technology is typically the linchpin in these accounts, with e-books signaling the demise of checking out books and Wikipedia replacing the need for reference work. In order to tell an alternate story of the library, of its necessity in the fabric of daily life in the United States, creative incorporations of emergent technologies and its vibrancy as a space of community interaction, I discuss the growth and popularity of the People's Library at Occupy Wall Street [1]. I first present traditional theory on the library as a social institution in the United States, tracing the connections between a library's collection and the values and norms of its local community. I then provide some brief contextual information on the Occupied Wall Street protests currently taking place in New York City and the People's Library, a free public library that has emerged as part of the protest. I combine personal experiences volunteering at the Library with text from the Library's blog to outline connections between libraries and activism, access and learning, texts and protest. In doing so, I hope not only to offer a counter example of the library as an institution on the edge of obsolescence, but to reconsider conceptualizations of how a library comes to reflect local norms and values. Thus two central arguments emerge from this analysis: first, that emergent, digital and participatory technologies are vital for the endurance rather than demise of libraries, and that a library's role in its community should be viewed not necessarily or not only in terms of its collection of texts, but in terms of its policies, including decisions about lending, cataloging and staffing.

The social role of the library

Taken on its own terms, the library as a social institution is in fact something of an oddity. As a librarian quoted in a recent *Guardian* article pointed out, "If someone suggested the idea of public libraries now, they'd be considered insane. If you said you were going to take a little bit of money from every taxpayer, buy a whole load of books and music and games, stick them on a shelf and tell everyone, 'These are yours to borrow and all you've got to do is bring them back,' they'd be laughed out of government" (Bathurst, 2011). The absurdity pointed out here is that of providing free resources using public money in a climate where private is always assumed to trump public. Understanding not only the survival of but the affection for and attachment to the public library in the United States has a lot to do with the particular history of libraries as sites of democratic accessibility of materials. It is also partially bound up in the altruism of Andrew Carnegie, whose donations of money to build libraries across the country resulted in a network of public sites that shared architectural styles as well as institutional aims (Library of Congress, 2011). This historical intertwining of class, privilege and patriarchal charity demonstrates the importance of *not* thinking of the library as either universally beneficial or ideologically neutral, but it also points to the ways in which public libraries in the United States are conceptually linked as having a shared history and shared objectives.

To understand this shared mission of public libraries in the United States more narrowly, we can turn to classic library literature, where Shera (1970) argued that libraries are social agencies that instill community values, ethics and even patriotism. In defining libraries as agencies, Shera meant that they figure as "a social creation, a social instrumentality through which the culture operates, in order to maintain itself" [2]. Shera placed particular emphasis on the library as a form

of communication, a focus that has both very pragmatic and more conceptual objectives. On the one hand, he argued that library work requires sophisticated and adept acts of communication, as in reference encounters with patrons (the extent to which communication theory can be applied to reference work has been researched — see Radford, 1999). As well, Shera felt that the library was intricately bound up in projects of social epistemology, or the ways that individuals access, make sense of and perceive information. The library for Shera is a concrete manifestation of and site for social epistemology, where texts and information are meted out to patrons with a specific objective of cultivating better-educated, more socially-aware citizens and community members [3]. In this construction — which has been formative in library science degree programs — collection development, reader advisory and reference assistance are all imbued with the responsibility of reinforcing localized ethics and propriety.

In particular, the library's collection of texts and media are read as a reflection of community norms, ethics and values. When a donor bequeaths books to a library, it is typically assumed that these donations are intended to “creat[e] a public library that respond[s] to and reflect[s] the community's needs and interests, not merely those expressed in public statements and official documents” (Stauffer, 2007). In other words, books are donated to a public library as a specific act of altruism whose value goes beyond the economic and expands into the ethical, such that not only the act of donating but the content of the donated materials is to be read as part of the contributed gift [4]. Some of the most relevant literature for a discussion of the library as a social institution reflecting community norms comes from work on various efforts to contest or censor the collection of a library (e.g., Robbins, 2000). These contestations have taken place for centuries, and typically center on the argument that a text doesn't belong in a library because it violates community norms and exposes community members — particularly children — to unwanted, unacceptable, unreadable materials. It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage substantively with the literature documenting and participating in these debates of library censorship; for my purposes here, I wish only to point out first that public libraries in the United States have a long association of reflecting community values and norms, and second that this reflection is viewed predominantly in terms of the books, music, games and movies brought into the library's collection.

Occupy Wall Street and the People's Library

Having explicated the traditional conceptualization of the library's role(s) in its surrounding community, I want to focus on a specific public library, the People's Library that emerged in the Occupy Wall Street protest. After giving some brief contextual information on Occupy Wall Street and the People's Library, I draw on personal observation of the Library as well as text from the Library blog to describe its origins, collection and policies. From there I turn to a discussion of what can be derived from looking at the People's Library for a larger discussion of libraries, technology and community.

On 13 July 2011, the group Adbusters issued a call for a protest of “redeemers, rebels and radicals” to “flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street” (Adbusters, 2011). From that initial demand for action, Occupy Wall Street began on 17 September in Lower Manhattan's Zuccotti Park and spread to over 100 cities globally. I first visited the Occupy Wall Street protest on 23 September. Wandering around Zuccotti Park, I saw people playing chess, debating, sleeping, playing in a drum circle and lots and lots of cardboard signs. I also saw a library in the form of books spread out on a tarp on one of the stone benches in the Northeast corner of the park. A cardboard sign announced it as the “People's Library.” At the time, there was no one to ask about the Library's history or intended purpose, but I was curious about its presence, especially within just a few days of the protest's emergence. I went back on 5 October and saw that spreading out books on tarps had been replaced with collecting books in bins. Instead of two or three dozen books, there were perhaps a hundred. There were also librarians, identified with name tags, organizing books into basic categories (classic fiction, foreign language, politics, religion and spirituality). By this point, the library had developed a system for marking books with “OWS” to denote it as belonging to the collection (accessioning, in library terminology). I went back on 7 October and volunteered at the Library for the first time, and have since gone back repeatedly to help out, with tasks ranging from organization to managing donations (collection development) to answering questions (reference encounters) to recommending books (reader advisory). When the New York Police Department raided Zuccotti Park on 15 November 2011, public outcry resulted from the removal and partial destruction of the library [5]. (For an account of the raid and retrieving the books, see Occupy Wall Street Library, 2011.) Since the Park's closure, the People's Library has mobilized to support various OWS actions, creating pop-up libraries and utilizing book mobiles.

As described on the Library's Web site, “the People's Library is the collective, public, open library of the Occupy Wall Street leaderless resistance movement ... The library provides free, open and unrestricted access to our collection of books, magazines, newspapers, 'zines, pamphlets and other materials that have been donated, collected, gathered and discovered during the occupation.” According to the Library's Web site, it began early on in the history of Occupy Wall Street, eventually fostering its own working group tasked with the Library's maintenance and policies. The Library's collection is comprised entirely of donated books. Having volunteered at the Library several times, I can attest to how this typically works — people stop by with bags of books and magazines. When Zuccotti Park was reopened on the afternoon of 15 November, I watched as the Library steadily grew to 200 books within the first few hours of park access. (This collection was later removed by the New York Police Department. Ever since the 15 November raid, the Library has been subject to rules about not creating “permanent structures” in the park.)

Speaking anecdotally, a common response from visitors to Occupy Wall Street upon seeing the Library (especially in the initial weeks of the protest, before it gained a degree of public awareness) was to display a degree of enthusiastic amusement, but also confusion. Some were curious as to the Library's policies, but others were on a much more

fundamental level curious about its existence at all. On the People's Library Web site, a librarian described her response to this kind of inquiry: "One of my least favorite questions ... is, 'WHY IS THERE A LIBRARY?' To this I say, 'Why is there a food station?' These are basic necessities ... THERE IS A LIBRARY BECAUSE WE ARE HERE AND KNOWLEDGE IS NECESSARY FOR SURVIVAL" (Marisa, 2011; emphasis in original). There are a number of tensions and assumptions going on in Marisa's text. For one, we see a construction of libraries as a "basic necessity," as something that protesters require as much as tarps, food and sleeping bags. There is a further connection being made between libraries and knowledge, tapping into conventions of libraries and activist causes. Before moving on to a more in-depth discussion of the role of education and technology at the People's Library, I want to flesh out for a moment the connection between libraries and activism.

To an extent, the marriage between libraries and activism is an established one. In addition to taking stances on issues like copyright, censorship and intellectual property, libraries have a history of participating in movements and discourses of activism and social justice. In their article on socially responsible librarianship, Morrone and Friedman (2009) provided a survey of librarian activism in the United States, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s. Responding to a period of sustained social upheaval, a number of libraries sought to provide resources, services and meeting spaces for feminists, the queer community and people of color, among other groups. In addition to community outreach, Morrone and Friedman emphasized the potential for libraries to incorporate underused or outsider materials, where the act of creating space on library shelves for texts from marginalized groups is symbolic of fostering tolerance, inclusivity and legibility [6]. Focusing specifically on issues of sociocultural politics and collection development (and particularly on the work of James Danky), Dilevko (2008) effectively provided both a call to action and a pragmatic blueprint for an "alternative vision" of acquisition policy that sees social justice as a core component of a library's collection. This conception of collection development as a library function with social, cultural and politic obligations forms an ideological basis for the construction of activist librarianship by insisting on providing services and (perhaps more typically) materials to and by those typically left out of mainstream libraries, and mainstream society at large. I would argue that this is an extension rather than rejection of Shera's (1970) traditional view of the library's institutional objective of reflecting community values in the content of the library's collection. The activist tweak here is to express tolerance and inclusion through the deliberate gathering of texts from marginalized, non-dominant groups. The activist ethics of the People's Library include this approach, but also many others, as I discuss more fully in the next section.

Discussion

In thinking about how the People's Library can be read in terms of broader conversations about libraries, communities, activism and technologies, I want to engage two specific components of how the library operates. First, the use of technology in creating an online catalog, and second the collection development and lending policies. Each of these components of library work reveals larger tensions surrounding the library as a social institution and the relationship between libraries and technology, particularly technologies that are digital, mobile and participatory.

Digital, DIY technologies

Within a month of its emergence, the People's Library began the task of creating an online catalog. I happened to be at the Library as this process was initially getting underway, and was struck by the seamless incorporation of smartphones, mobile apps and cloud-based spreadsheets into traditional cataloging work [7]. As explained on their Web site, the project involved "scanning all the barcodes of media in our collection and photographing the title pages or covers of those without bar codes. We're using the free and open source application Bar Code Scanner which creates a CSV file. We can then import the file into LibraryThing — they've generously offered us a free lifetime account! We continued scanning into the night using headlamps and flashlights" (People's Library, 2011). The decision to use LibraryThing was in fact a semi-fraught one. Launched in 2006, LibraryThing is a "cataloging and social networking site for book lovers," and allows users to create online catalogs of books (LibraryThing, 2011a). The service is free up to 200 texts, and in addition to enabling the creation of an online catalog, provides discussion forums, recommendation functions and user profiles. The initial hesitance among librarians at the People's Library to use LibraryThing was based on the politics of open source software; although LibraryThing is (for collections of 200 or fewer, at least) free, it doesn't make its code available for open distribution or modification. In the context of activist politics, open source technologies represent anti-proprietary, pro-hacker, pro-intellectual freedom ideologies. As such, the free-form, open-ended politics of Occupy Wall Street lent themselves to an advocacy for a collaborative, cooperative, unrestricted platform for digital cataloging. These themes emerged both in conversations that I heard taking place at the People's Library as well as in discussion forums on the Library's Web site.

The decision to use LibraryThing highlights ethics of opting for some technologies over others (because they reflect values of information access and/or open source technology), but more generally, what I read in the People's Library creation of a digital, mobile and participatory technologies is a neat refutation of the death of the library at the hands of digital media and/or online technologies. What we see here is that some of the very tools that have been hailed as signaling the demise of libraries (mobile devices, the Internet) are in fact being used to create an enduring record of what goes into the library. Here, tools of digital media are not exposing the irrelevance of libraries, but instead offer the means of developing it into a complex, sophisticated and digitally-accessible entity. Furthermore, the impulse to incorporate mobile technologies, free apps and cloud computing into cataloging work was undertaken not as a means of authoritarian monitoring or patron control, but as a documentation of civil protest and do it yourself (DIY) education. Given the lending policy of providing materials to *anyone* for *any* amount of time, there is no need for a digital catalog as a tool that tracks check outs or overdue notices.

Instead, the act of building a digital catalog moves the library from a bounded place to a digital one, and speaks to an interest in building something that extends beyond Occupy Wall Street as a physically-bounded space to a digitally-accessible one. When digital technologies are characterized as eclipsing or rendering obsolete traditional media, it assumes an either/or relationship; at the People's Library, it is a with/and relationship, where digital technologies offer an important compliment to and symbiosis with existing practices. To discuss this relationship between library functions in a DIY capacity more complexly, I turn to a broader analysis of the People's Library policies.

Policies are politics

It might be tempting to suggest an analysis of Occupied Wall Street's values by looking at the Library's collection, under the premise that the movement's objectives or interests are likely to be represented in the Library's collection. In my own experience, when people find out that I've spent time at the Library, they are frequently curious as to what books are available, expecting a prevalence of Karl Marx and Howard Zinn. Although these questions are interesting and deserve investigation, I would propose an alternate inquiry, largely inspired by an early experience at the Library as I attempted to understand how it had emerged and what it intended to do at the protest. Probably the dumbest question I asked at the People's Library was "have you had a problem with theft?" It seemed like a reasonable question, as theft is certainly a problem at most libraries. But as a librarian gently pointed out, it is in fact impossible to steal books from the People's Library, given the lending policy that books can be taken from the Library and kept for any period of time, without ever having to be returned. This led me to understand that the People's Library reflects the values of its community through its policies, not through its collection. Returning to Shera's ideas that libraries are a reflection of a community's ethics and values, it makes sense that a movement founded on (at least the ideals of) democracy, free exchange of ideas, egalitarianism and openness would create a library with an egalitarian work force and open lending policy.

It is not my intent to idealize the protest or overstate the Library's importance. But I would argue that there is for me a profoundly useful claim being made here about what it is that libraries do, why they're important and what they show about the people who use them. The People's Library is viewed as a basic necessity by its librarians because it provides resources that are so fundamental to the protest surrounding it, namely tools of education, conversation and interaction. The Library provides these things partly through the content in its collection, which is why the Library has asked specifically for donations of books on "resistance and people's history ... economics and finance books ... contemporary philosophy and ecology ... non-English books and materials for low literacy readers" (Radical Reference, 2011). These requests are precisely in keeping with a traditional view of a library's collection as a reflection of its politics, where the protest's interests in progressive politics and social change are mirrored by the content valued by its librarians. The final two categories in this list, for materials in languages other than English and for low-literacy readers, is furthermore in keeping with the standard construct of activist collection development, as referenced earlier in works by Dilevko (2008), Morrone and Friedman (2009), where the interest in reaching out to marginalized groups is expressed through requesting specific materials and assets to be brought into the collection. Yet I would argue that understanding the People's Library in terms of its activist ethics, it is not sufficient to look solely at what it collects, but rather at its policies as a whole.

The Library certainly intends to be a space where someone can learn about political activism and protest history, but it also intended to enable protesters to relax, talk to each other and gain information about non-protest related issues. In volunteering at the Library, I have often been asked about anarchist, conspiracy and protest literature, but I have also fielded requests for poetry, science fiction and romance novels. Part of the Library's objective is to educate, but partly it is also there to entertain, and to mitigate the tension and occasional boredom that sets in during long, continuous protests. As well, a large number of my interactions at the Library have not been with people currently occupying the square or protesting, but with visitors curious about OWS a whole. For them, I suspect that the Library offered a way to feel comfortable asking questions and to see the vestiges of a recognizable institution within an anti-authoritarian movement. In this sense, the Library lends legitimacy to Occupy Wall Street via the presence of a familiar institution, but also an entry point for making sense of a vibrant, complex, occasionally self-contradictory movement. This sense-making may take place literally, by asking librarians questions, or it may take place more abstractly, by recognizing the Library as a site of learning, access, sharing and community, and extrapolating those values onto the protest as a whole. This is precisely the kind of function that cannot be evaluated solely by looking at the Library's values, and must instead (or as well) take into account its policies of open-lending, volunteer-staffing and auto-archiving. These are the politics and ethics of the People's Library, and they operate entirely outside of the content of its collection.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to unravel two myths about public libraries: first, that technology presents a threat to the need for or relevance of the library, which I argued should be thoroughly reconsidered given the example of organic, bottom-up, DIY innovations at the People's Library, which is reliant on smart phones and social networking sites as much as traditional library functions such as accession marks and reference encounters. It does a disservice to libraries to continue to promote the easy narrative that digital media and online technologies are incompatible with and stand to replace libraries. A more productive line of inquiry might instead ask what kinds of hacks, assemblages, collaborations and appropriations are already taking place within public libraries? How can these activities be fostered and shared?

Secondly, I argued that although classic library literature has generated a tendency to understand a library's ethics in terms of its collection of books and media, this is an insufficient means for gauging the activist ethics at the People's Library. In

terms of the traditional construct of a library as reflecting community norms, it is not my intent to set aside this view, only to think about the utility of extending it beyond a library's collection to include its policies of access, organization and staffing. In addition to (and importantly, not instead of) asking whether a library is inclusive of non-dominant groups by looking for books that speak to marginalized experience, it is necessary to (re)consider lending policies, classification schemes and staffing demographics as representative of community norms and values. These are ambitious metrics, and I am not naïve as to the significant economic and labor challenges that make any serious revisions of these policies problematic. But I would nonetheless point out that if we bring out these issues in discussion of library politics, we create a more robust and holistic set of measures for understanding institutional obligations to our communities. The People's Library emerged from the Occupy Wall Street protest as a grassroots effort within a grassroots movement, and the ethics and politics of one map quite clearly onto the other. I find it both useful and exciting to think of what can be learned by looking for similar bridging of ethics in public libraries as a site of community values.

About the author

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Notes

1. Libraries have sprung up at different Occupy protests across the globe (see LibraryThing, 2011b — the comments forum for this blog post are revelatory in exposing tensions between libraries as community institutions that conflict with local politics).

2. Shera, 1970, p. 58.

3. Reading Shera (1970) in a post-modern, post-Foucauldian mind frame, it is striking to note the lack of any sense in Shera's text that this reinforcement of ideology is at all problematic or potentially a means of reproducing hegemonic inequality. A more critical reading might position the library as an ideological state apparatus subjecting (and subjugating) patrons to sovereign norms. Some work has been done on the applications of critical theory to the library as an institution; for a review of Foucauldian theory within library and information science scholarship, see Buschman (2007). For issues of social justice and library cataloging, see Drabinski (2009).

4. Incidentally, it is also possible to consider the act of deaccessioning, or removing items from a library's collection, as a reflection of what is no longer valued, educational or interesting. See Radford, *et al.* (2012).

5. The People's Library is one of the claimants in a lawsuit filed against the city, seeking damages to books and other library property incurred during the raid (Ax, 2012).

6. For a nuanced perspective on the librarian culture at work in terms of activism, see the collection *Revolting Librarians Redux* (Roberto and West, 2003), in which a number of authors who participated in the 1972 anthology *Revolting Librarians* (1972) revisit issues of social justice and community inclusion.

7. The catalog wound up being instrumental in retrieving books from the Department of Sanitation post-raid. I was able to volunteer the morning after the raid to help reclaim library property. In one of the more Heller-esque demands of the Department of Sanitation, despite the fact that books from the People's Library were clearly marked as Library property, we were asked to check each of the books we wanted to claim off of the printed out catalog. This obviously prolonged the process of reclaiming books into a project of several hours.

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