Information access and activism: Libraries and resource centres promoting and curating people's knowledge

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Amidst the jargon of the knowledge economy and information highway, libraries—the very institutions that specialize in information access and literacy—are struggling to stay afloat faced with cutbacks from administrations that no longer see libraries as vital components of a democratic society. This paper reports on the first phase of a research project examining the evolving role of libraries and resource centres supporting community development and civic participation, focusing on three aspects: Information literacy; documenting people's knowledge; and library space. Current literature in critical library studies is explored to survey the changing trends in information access, knowledge management, and documentation with an emphasis on social justice. The goal of the presentation is to invite discussion to integrate adult educators' perspectives on these issues.

There is an important role for collaboration with adult educators. Inclusive education requires inclusive information access. Gouthro and Holloway (2016) note the importance of libraries in austere times to provide access to information, and recognize the role of such places for nurturing cultural industries that contribute to economic development. Examples abound of systematized exclusion, such as Smythe's (2016) research demonstrating the practices of exclusion evidenced in government websites. Optimistic descriptions of open government and citizen participation are undermined by bureaucratic literacies that obfuscate information. Literacy instruction must constantly evolve to support learners to navigate convoluted information systems. Crowther and Mackie's (2015) research on citizens' information seeking patterns during the Scottish referendum note the importance of internet sources to assist in political decision making and participation. Add to this the high profile news stories of state-level propaganda, spin, and manipulation of news media, or surveillance of people's online activities—such examples point to what Jordan (2015) describes as 'political antagonism of information' (p143).

Framing the study
Libraries working in communities typically refer to public libraries, but I am also exploring examples from academic and special libraries, since staff in such institutions are also dealing with issues of evolving roles to keep pace with technological and social changes. Resource centres may be independent or linked to a development organisation (NGO) with a focus on their local communities offering services ranging

from library collections to documentation and training. 'Community resource centres and community learning centres in many countries serve as focal points for popular education, community involvement and valuing local knowledge' (Adams et al 2002).

Acknowledgement of the dearth of library-focused research in the field of adult education has been cited over the years, though there are signs of renewed interest. Researchers in the mainstream library science field also have done little to contribute to a broadened understanding of librarianship explicitly as education. Sanford & Clover's (2016) research on adult learning in public libraries, note the reticence among library staff they interviewed to describe their work as adult education.

There are, however, areas of librarianship that have been more willing to embrace the educational role of library workers, particularly those working in social justice environments (Adams et al 2002). The contributions of critical and poststructural social theories have helped deepen the understanding of the political power of information, and the roles and responsibilities of librarians working in the "information ecosystem" (Gustafson 2017). Librarians have long advocated for freedom of access to information and pushed back against censorship. Outsiders to the field may be amused to hear of 'anarchist librarians' or 'radical reference' but such terms reflect a growing interest in making visible the explicitly educational role librarians can play to support people's empowerment goals, and awareness of librarians' activism in social justice work.

For the purpose of this review, I am focusing on three spheres of activity: Information literacy; people's knowledge; and library space. I have selected these spheres as they address the activities of library workers, the collections they curate for people, and the physical space of libraries and resource centres embedded in the communities in which they serve.

Information literacy
Information literacy, generally, describes the skill development process to enable people to find and utilize the information they need. However, access to information alone is insufficient to foster engaged, active citizenship, and there is a growing awareness of the importance of examining the sources of information and issues of power in knowledge creation and dissemination. Issues that are driving the critical analysis of information literacy include:
- Perceptible resurgence in propaganda and spin
- Restrictions on access to relevant information, or financial barriers to access
- Oceans of data and documents available online, but how to navigate the waters

Sharing the theoretical framing of critical social science and critical pedagogy, 'critical information literacy' (Elmborg 2006) engages in critiques of mainstream knowledge production and provision, looking at power and control over information. Elmborg notes there is not universal agreement on the definition of information literacy which is problematic, thus Freire's critical pedagogy provides a helpful push back:

Is the library a passive information bank where students and faculty make knowledge deposits and withdrawals, or is it a place where students actively engage existing knowledge and shape it to their own current and future uses? And what is the librarian's role as an educator in this process (p 193)?

As the last question shows, the concept has meaning not only for the participant, but also for the librarian in terms of gaining the skill and confidence as a teacher to help develop the information literacy skills in others. Riedler and Eryaman (2010) draw upon critical and poststructural theories to examine the inherently political nature of librarianship, a move that confronts the traditional 'positivist' notions of libraries as unbiased keepers of information and promotes their potential to participate more fully in collective learning and community building.

Gustafson (2017) describes the importance of understanding the "information life cycle from creation to consumption" (p 1) in which people gain an understanding of the myriad contexts (political, historical, social, etc) that affect the creation of information and the ways people comprehend and make use of it, as well as researchers' own participation in creation through a hierarchical scholarly publishing framework.

Lankes (2016) summarizes the long history of librarianship, and the commitment to learning and sharing information that has defined the profession for generations, as well as the efforts of librarians to advocate for free and equitable access to information. Trosow (2014) also notes the concern expressed by librarians over the growing 'commodification' of information and influence of market forces. In response, there is a determination to defend 'the notion of information as a public good' (p 17) and resist attempts of 'enclosure' (p 22). I want to reiterate this point as a reminder that librarians have not only worked directly with people to provide instruction and access to information, many also advocate in the policy sphere to protect people's information rights, such as challenging restrictive copyright legislation. Trosow argues for the importance of political-economic analyses regarding information and libraries, and expresses concern when library advocacy efforts remain restricted to 'the particular narrow issue at hand' (p 21). I would suggest that the narrowing focus may be also be a symptom of low staffing levels and competing demands that remove people from the very aspects of the work of librarianship that drew them to the profession in the first place.

Assumptions that information literacy is just a matter of helping people learn and become comfortable with new technology is also a limiting factor. Eubanks (2011) describes her efforts to create computer training for women which stumbled until she developed a better understanding of the women's lives and existing daily interactions with technology. The women may have worked in tedious data entry jobs, or had faced the scrutiny of computer in the social services office which appeared to make all the decisions in their efforts to obtain financial assistance. Their aversion to the technology was not a result of ignorance, but of direct unjust experiences. For those of us working in libraries who find increasing amounts of our time on computer training and technical support, being aware of the people's contexts and priorities is important to ensure

relevant support rather than replicating instructional methods that, in turn, replicate subordination. Torrell (2010) describes a collaboration between instructors and librarians using 'contact zone pedagogy' that helps students expose the power inequalities and potential manipulation of information as they go through numerous steps in a research task.

There is a tendency in some of this literature to set up an oppositional scenario of traditional versus critical library environments, (traditional=passive; critical=active) but I would argue that the divide is not so clear. Even the standard library practice of the 'reference interview' can be seen as a dialogic process of engaging a person into discussion and questioning to learn more about what it is they are really looking for, since a patron's initial question may be quite vague (which is probably the very reason why they are coming to the library to look for help in the first place!). Several cases describe the use of methods adopted from critical and feminist pedagogy for group learning settings, and may play with standard library instructional methods for one-to-one reference assistance.

'Source authority' refers to the knowledge that the information being used is reliable. This varies according to sector and use. Hoyer & MacDonald (2014) note that in some areas of the social services grey literature is very important, but for the reader it can be hard to determine the credibility of a small NGO's good research paper, and a 'shiny PDF' that looks good but may come from a biased source. 'In the social services sector, determining source authority comes not through traditional processes of looking at the type of publication or its origin but through interaction with the community of the authors and publishers, and knowledge of which authors and publishers are producing the most relevant and reliable information' (p 32).

Battista (2012) also argues that it is a critical skill of citizens to be able to seek and assess information to participate in society. Challenges to this ability come from western education systems that are increasingly skewed to treat education as job training and not citizen training, and by the vast amount of information from various forms that is now available. The academic emphasis on databases and peer-reviewed journals leads instruction to focus on search skills and sources of information that are only relevant to a university context that people will not have access to when they graduate. Battista pushes back by emphasizing the importance or integrating social media in library instruction since that is where people are already and it allows for more creativity for people to curate their own information sources. For example, people can add current news feeds that are more up to date than published academic literature. I would add the caveat from criticisms of social media potentially creating self-reinforcing bubbles where information is filtered through a person's existing network and preferences, reducing the serendipity of the unexpected.

People's knowledge: Whose information is accessible?
As people develop the critical skills to evaluate other sources of information, they may also begin identifying their potential roles as content creators to ensure their community's knowledge is preserved. Libraries are increasingly aware of their role in

fostering collections and providing access to information that promotes the diversity of their communities, through initiatives bringing sexual diversity to light (Silva Alentejo, 2014), integrating indigenous knowledges (Kelly, 2010), or supporting political education and participation of previously excluded groups (Badawi, 2007). Local organisations have an important role as information hubs for regional development activity, particularly with the opportunities of internet access. Earlier discussions of the 'digital divide' have evolved to the call for 'digital inclusion' which considers the learning and engagement required for people to use information in their own knowledge creation, the issues run deeper than mere access to the technology. It cannot be forgotten that very real barriers to access remain, particularly in rural areas.

Social movements need information for evidence and mobilization but an incredible amount of information and knowledge is also generated as a result of their activities. Resource and documentation centres have a key role to play in curating knowledges that have been marginalized by the mainstream (see Clashes, 2013). Moran (2014) describes the work of anarchist libraries. She also uses the term 'infoshop' noting that anarchists have for a long time placed emphasis on the collection and sharing of literature: 'Anarchists, by definition suspicious of the state and its institutions, have also wanted to protect their own historical writings and culture' (Moran, p. 175). She adds a quote that acknowledges that most of these collections that reside with activists within the movement 'remain in the hands of the producing communities, preserved by the people who participated in the very struggles that are being documented' (Hoyt, 2012, p. 32 in Moran p. 175). Moran describes 'independent community archives' which are often a local response to a failure of mainstream organisations to include those groups, much like the anarchist groups did. They are not 'vanity projects, nor as alternatives to active struggle, but rather as acts of resistance, consciously made' (p. 176). Yet, their insistence on independence opens them to problems of organisation and sustainability both financially and in terms of preservation of the material, relying on a few dedicated souls. Some anarchist libraries become affiliated with a university to support them.

Allard and Ferris (2015) describe participatory archiving initiatives to gather information related to discrimination against indigenous peoples in Canada. The significance of this work is made all the more relevant following news in April 2016 that testimonies gathered while documenting abuses at residential schools will be destroyed after 15 years unless claimants specifically request they be archived (Perkel April 4, 2016). This is a controversial decision since some claimants argue that this is vitally important first-person testimony of abuses.

Library spaces – and linkages
Public libraries in particular have long recognized their role in communities for providing a free, safe space for all, including vulnerable and marginalized populations. Riedler and Eryaman (2010) note the link of the shift to a transformative community-based library requires a rethinking of the space, and for the 'barriers that exist for underrepresented groups, including the digital divide, social and political exclusion from political participation and individual, institutional and structural inequalities of allocation and distribution of public resources' (p. 93).

In response to events in the United States in recent years, this role has become more visible and politicized, and defined as 'sanctuary spaces.' Lankes (2016) refers to the libraries in Ferguson, Missouri and other areas that experienced riots, who resolutely remained open to provide safe spaces for the local population. Other libraries have been reassuring undocumented migrants and refugees that the library is a safe space for them to visit.

Part of this work also involves breaking down barriers and stereotypes of information work. Community or academic partners express appreciation for the skill of information workers and surprise that they didn't really think of their role before. Information people speak of their growing intentional political acts and critique of rules and processes that are typically described as being neutral, while being deeply embedded in cultural practices that privilege certain ways of know over other ways. Lankes (2016) describes 'community reference' and 'community collections' as strategies for library workers to take more active roles in local organisations, bringing their listening and questioning skills to projects.

At the time of writing this paper (2017), the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) has released 10 recommendations for libraries in Canada to respond to the call initiated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's 94 Calls to Action to start healing the wounds of the legacy of abuses against indigenous peoples. The CFLA looked at the calls to see where libraries could play a role, and identified 10 key areas. The recommendations include issues of literacy, knowledge curation, and physical space that represents the indigenous worldviews.

Integrating adult educators' perspectives
As I noted in the introduction, this review of the literature is an early phase of a project to consider the evolving role of libraries and resource centres. Highlighting the research from the perspective of librarians is intended to generate discussion and engagement with the adult education community, who have decades of experience in critical and participatory education practices.

One thing that I have not seen described in detail in the cases I have read, is the hard work that is involved in participatory models—issues that have been discussed at length within adult education and community practice. Perhaps this area of the field is still too new to allow for such reflection and acknowledgement of challenges, so they are emphasizing the importance, legitimacy of this area of work. This is perhaps a space where adult educators and community development workers can contribute to the analysis and guidance on partnerships.

Some of the questions that currently interest me include:
- Where do adult educators see themselves in the library?
- What are the issues adult educators face regarding access to information?
- What is the role for adult educators to preserve knowledge?

- What ways can adult educators collaborate with librarians for critical literacy, citizen participation, and politicized learning?

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