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Article

The Librarian-As-Insider-Ethnographer

Jessie Lymn
University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

This article considers preliminary findings from ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Australia and Canada in do-it-yourself (DIY) libraries and archives. These spaces are usually run on small or no budgets, often in squatted or donated spaces, with no paid staff. They are motivated by a DIY ethos, and often have a connection to so-called "underground" communities. In this article the author responds to Chris Atton's model of librarian-as-ethnographer, which argues that information workers can draw on ethnographic methods to build cultural maps of grassroots and DIY communities. The author proposes that there are information professionals already in these communities, and their roles in both professional and DIY libraries enhances the librarian-as-ethnographer model by providing an insider perspective that may mediate tensions between the two collection spaces. The author draws on her fieldwork in zine libraries, infoshops, and social centers as example.

In 1998, Chris Atton presented his idea of librarian-as-ethnographer as an enhanced acquisitions practice in libraries (Atton, 1998). He suggested that this ethnographic practice could be used to develop "cultural maps" of subject areas – in his case, underground and alternative "public spheres" – and that these maps in turn can be used as initial subject guides for both researchers and librarians. In this article I respond to Atton's model of librarian-as-ethnographer. I propose that there are information professionals already in these communities, and their roles in both professional and do-it-yourself (DIY) libraries enhance the librarian-as-ethnographer model by providing an insider perspective on the culture. In Australia and Canada, DIY libraries are usually run on small or no budgets, often in squatted or donated spaces, with no paid staff. They are motivated by a DIY ethos, and often have a connection to so-called "underground" communities or practices. I suggest that the librarian-as-insider-ethnographer is an innovative approach to library practice, recognizing and defining the everyday communities and practices of library workers.

I will explain Atton's model, and then draw on my fieldwork in zine[1] libraries, infoshops and social centers to describe the grassroots libraries and archives that are also collecting and preserving the material produced by these communities. I draw on Moore & Pell's (2010) notion of autonomous archives to delineate between institutional collections (i.e., where the acquisitions librarian works) and DIY collections (i.e., zine libraries and social centers). Finally, I consider the insider-librarian as a mediator between the two collection spaces, and highlight the value of training and hiring librarians and archivists from within these communities.

The Librarian-As-Ethnographer

In his article, Atton (1998) describes his model of librarian-as-ethnographer working with material from "alternative public spheres" (p. 155). Most of this material is paper-based, in limited circulation and ephemeral. Examples include flyers and posters from activist events, self-published material like zines, and faxes publicizing events. Atton argues that links can be created between the analog material (the flyers, zines, posters, etc.) and the multitude of electronic data available about these communities. For him, this linking is a way of "future-proofing" digital archives by recognizing the relationship between sub-culturally produced material regardless of whether it is analog or digital (Atton, 1998, p. 154). Atton argues that building collections of alternative communities'

[1] Zine making is a DIY practice where people make their own publications, print their work themselves and distribute them outside of traditional distribution models (Duncombe, 1997). Zines are often associated with underground and punk or activist communities, but can also emerge from literary, sports and fan communities.

ephemera is important not only to preserve the analog material traces of these moments in history, but to also strengthen the electronic archives being generated both by the information profession (e.g., digital archives) and the wider communities themselves (e.g., mailing lists, websites, social networks). This relationship between the digital and analog is essential in determining how to preserve and make the material traces of these alternative public spheres accessible. [2]

Atton acknowledges that getting access to information in these alternative communities is often difficult, given the temporary and ephemeral nature of the material. For anyone to get access to this information they need to be ‘‘in the know” or in the “right place at the right time" (Thornton, in Atton, 1998, p. 155), which is usually limited to the activists or members of the communities themselves. Often the material is purposefully made inaccessible for reasons of privacy, or as a reflection of the relationship between the community and the state (e.g., anarchists). For example, the context of flyers for activist events or protests is dependent on a secondary understanding of that particular activist group’s political motivations at that time. For librarians and archivists, this ephemerality and inaccessibility hinders not only the acquisitions process of these types of materials, but often also limits the usefulness of the material.

Atton proposes the librarian-as-ethnographer as an enhancement to the acquisitions process. This type of librarian draws on methods and techniques used in traditional ethnographic research, such as participant observation, and uses the data collected to develop what he calls “cultural maps” of the communities and spheres (Atton, 1998, p. 156). The cultural maps are not intended to be replacements for catalog records or finding aids. Rather they are “thick descriptions” of the source of the ephemeral material (Geertz, 1973). By drawing on terms from anthropology and ethnography in particular, Atton demonstrates how he is drawing on research methodologies in order to re-contextualize library practices.

Atton (1998) includes a narrative about an anarchist publication called *Counter Information* as an example map in his article[3]. The narrative gives brief bibliographic data, and then details how the publication was obtained “…from an infoshop in the centre of the city” (p. 157). It goes on to give a short description of the infoshop and what else happens there, including the hosting of the publication’s website. It describes the anti-copyright status of the publication, and gives examples of similar publications produced at the same infoshop. Atton’s map starts with a “you are here” by naming the publication, and then leads the reader along a path similar to the one that he, the librarian-as-ethnographer, took. He says,

> [The map] provides not only a physical location for the production of the publication, it goes some way towards explaining the peculiarities of that location,

[2] This differentiation between analog and digital as separate places often goes unquestioned and it is assumed that material is either born digital or digitized, or remains analog. Atton’s discussion reinforces that the material co-exists, and in fact each informs the other’s presence.

[3] The map Atton describes is a narrative, not a visual, map, although it is expected that these maps could include visual elements.

> [it's role as] a node on an alternative network for various types of media, [and] as a site for the origination and distribution of other materials. (p. 157)

The map explains the concepts of infoshops and anti-copyright, valorizing these for both researchers and librarians. He suggests that because of the anti-copyright, librarians can legally take copies of the material for their own collections.

Atton argues the role of the special collections librarian sets a precedent for a wider application of the ethnographic model and the development of cultural maps in the acquisitions field because the special collections librarian has an intimate knowledge of the "cultures and social networks that produce documents" (Atton, 1998, p. 156). For Atton, this librarian is an outsider going into a community, undertaking ethnographic fieldwork in order to enhance an object's record. The insider/outsider debate in anthropology is an ongoing conversation for those undertaking research. The insider carries both privilege and diversion from the ethnographic project, as does the outsider who goes in. This article aims not to prioritize one over the other, but rather to encourage an awareness of the way in which both positions can be put to use to enhance library special collection practices.

DIY Collections

Based on my own ethnographic observations and my experience in these DIY libraries and archives, I will extend Atton's model of librarian-as-ethnographer to a model of ethnographic-insider-librarian. Atton's model works from an assumption that the librarians are not already members of these alternative spheres – implying that the collections or acquisitions librarian is an objective third party, charged with the responsibility to collect and preserve the material ephemera of these communities. There is the sense that the librarians don't participate in DIY and grassroots communities; but they do.

I spend a lot of my time in DIY libraries and collections: zine libraries, infoshops and social centers, spaces where grassroots or alternative communities produce, consume and collect information (Dodge, 1998; Hedtke, 2008). The following extract is from my field notes of a trip to Halifax, Canada in the fall of 2010, and provides context to the DIY libraries and archives that my argument draws from:

> Yesterday I was sitting on a couch cataloguing zines at the Roberts Street Social Centre. It was a Monday night, and nearly winter. All the doors and windows of the house were firmly shut to keep the cold out, and there was someone cooking a communal meal in the kitchen. There were four others in Roberts Street zine library, and people came and went through the room as the night went on. People cataloguing zines included me, a visiting zine maker and PhD student looking at zine libraries; the current artist in residence at the social centre (a zine maker from Milwaukee); one of the zine librarians who'd developed the zine library's Drupal based

> catalogue, and two other local zinesters who'd come to the weekly 'zine cataloguing party'.
>
> As we each worked through the cataloguing process (which involves reading a zine and collecting bibliographic data about it on a paper form, which was then entered into the computer by the zine librarian) we talked about the zines we were cataloguing. Sometimes someone would ask if anyone knew the author, or there'd be discussion about the year a zine came out based on its content. At one point we had to decide whether to include a zine maker's real name on the catalogue record – someone knew them personally, but it wasn't anywhere on the zine. We decided not to, imagining our own practices when making zines, and discussing our preference for anonymity at times. We worked for a few hours, collecting information about the zines, sharing stories and getting to know each other.
>
> I left Halifax the next day, but sometimes still pine for that room and the house – it was a 'little library space' where I felt at home.

Autonomous Archives

Shauna Moore and Susan Pell introduced the term *autonomous archives* to describe the archives of "emergent publics … [as] … nascent communities without … solidified group cohesion, loci of identification or external recognition" (Moore & Pell, 2010, p. 257). They give examples of these archives, including the archive of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs; the photographic records of a project in Canada's so-called poorest neighborhood (downtown Eastside in Vancouver); and a collection of documents kept by squatters in downtown Vancouver. These archives are "*autonomous,* in the sense that the group is its own source of initiative and responsibility, … acting without deferring to another's authority (such as the state)" (Moore & Pell, 2010, p. 258, their emphasis). Here I use the word *archive* to encompass a wider range of information practices and spaces, which include preservation and access to cultural materials. DIY libraries and archives such as zine libraries and social centers are also autonomous archives because they are often temporary, or transitory, collections and are not representative of an easily identified or categorized group of people. These libraries don't often ask for recognition from external institutions, such as tax registration or incorporation, a feature of other, more focused and solidified community libraries and archives like local history societies and private lending libraries. The libraries are motivated by various desires: to preserve particular material remnants of a subculture, to provide access to underground and alternative resources for the community, to create a space for people to spend time in, and so on.

For example, the Octapod Zine Library in Newcastle, Australia, has a colorful history of people utilizing the library space, including local activists, zine makers, community arts volunteers and library school students. The common thread of people who have been involved in the zine library over its ten-year history is a commitment to the DIY nature of

the library. At the Toronto Zine Library in Canada, the small cash reserve the library has is stored at a volunteer's home as the library doesn't have a bank account, and the location of the library is in flux – it's current home is in a leaking room on the first floor of a live music venue in Toronto, without a formal lease and increasingly strict access conditions. The Bibliograph/e Zine Library in Montreal is currently housed on two bookshelves at a local vegetarian café. The DIY practices of zine making are reflected in these autonomous archival collections.

Institutional Collections

In contrast to these autonomous archives are collections in institutional collections. Recent collections of zines that I've encountered in Australia and Canada are at the State Library of Victoria, the National Library of Australia, and the Vancouver Public Library. These collection spaces are definitely *not* autonomous archives. They are, as Moore and Pell (2010) describe, preserving an "official memory", under auspice of the state, and based on the idea that the collection's archivist, librarian or curator is an objective guardian, "seen as inclusive and impartial" (Moore & Pell, 2010, p. 256).
I argue that these institutional librarians are putting Atton's librarian-as-ethnographer model into practice. The collecting librarians and curators are going out into the communities rather than simply buying zines at arm's length. For example, an opportune time to acquire zines is at a zine fair (a day-long event organized either by a community or by an institution such as a city council or art gallery). At recent zine fairs in Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle, I have bumped into librarians from State Libraries and the National Library of Australia. They have been there buying zines for their collections and promoting Legal Deposit[4]. In 2009, two librarians from the National Library of Australia were at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia Zine Fair to research and engage with the community. They made a small zine about the National Library's Legal Deposit requirement, and were handing it out and trading it with other zine makers. Trading zines is a popular distribution and circulation practice in the zine community (Todd & Watson, 2006), and these librarians had obviously researched the community and its practices, and attempted to take part. This is an example of the acquisitions librarians immersing themselves in the community, as per Atton's recommendations.

But these relationships are ones in which the outsider goes into the community, and, as in other ethnographic research, there are often tensions between the ethnographer and the subjects. In the case of the National Library librarians, members of the zine community publicly and privately criticized their presence at the zine fair with their zine. The following comment about them is found in a newsletter from the Sticky Institute zine shop:

> [Z]ine librarians making zines about how cool legal deposit systems are to trade with zinesters? Your attempted interactions are false and transparent. Just...stop. (Sticky Institute, 2009, August, "From the Malcontent", para. 3)

[4] For more information about Australia's Legal Deposit practices, see http://www.nla.gov.au/legal-deposit

This public condemnation of a librarian's attempt to immerse in a community highlights issues with Atton's model of the librarian-ethnographer going into a community rather than being part of the community.

The Librarian-As-Insider-Ethnographer

I propose instead a model that is based on observations of a relatively large population of library workers and library workers in training that are already in zine communities and doing library work in the DIY collection spaces described above. Take for example my fellow volunteers at the Toronto Zine Library in Canada, three of the six regular volunteers worked in, or were looking for work in, libraries and archives. At the Anchor Archive in Halifax, the founder works at a local public library, and two library school students have recently done their MLIS projects there to develop an open source catalog. At the Octapod Zine Library in Newcastle, Australia, a library technician-in-training recently finished up three years of volunteer work. There are numerous other examples of volunteers in DIY libraries who are qualified or in-training librarians. Kate Eichhorn (2010) notes this phenomenon in her analysis of contemporary feminist collection practices in institutional collections. Observing a "countless number of third wave feminist collectors, archivists, and librarians" (p. 628) in institutional collections, she notes that "many of the professional archivists and librarians [she] met during the course of [her] research started their careers as volunteers in community-based archives and continue to be affiliated with these collections [and that they are] committed to blurring their professional and activist work" (p. 635). She highlights the importance of each library worker's own activist and community membership in directing his or her acquisition, preservation and access work. These librarians and archivists are working with their *own* communities and practices, and I argue, could be examples of insider-ethnographer-librarians at work.

This proposed model considers the librarian as insider-ethnographer and relies on libraries and archives recognizing the value of their employees' identification with subcultural communities. When the ethnographer is already part of the community, the ethnographer is able to negotiate the politics of representation and identification from a perspective of his or her own practice, or within already established relationships. This is not an argument against outsider-librarians and archivists building knowledge of and maps of subcultural communities. Instead, I suggest to those working in these libraries and archives that hiring or interning members of these subcultural communities who have an existing interest in library practices may enhance their ethnographic practices.

Conclusion

This article has presented an extension of the already established practice of librarian-as-ethnographer. This extended model values those librarians who are already practicing members of subcultural or alternative communities and works towards a model of librarian-as-insider-ethnographer, thereby enhancing library collection practices while enriching library zine collections. The insider-ethnographer is able to negotiate the tensions between the formal collecting institutions and their own

subcultural communities. The relatively large population of trained or in-training librarians in these subcultural communities is a valuable resource to the wider information profession.

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Jessie Lymn is a PhD Candidate in the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. She has a Master of Arts in Information & Knowledge Management and a Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies.