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The Sidewalk Is Our Reference Desk: When Librarians Take to the Streets

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Abstract

Radical Reference is a volunteer-run collective that provides free reference and instruction services to independent journalists, political activists and the public online (<http://radicalreference.info>) and in person at protests and political events. In our online setting a highly collaborative, multilingual, volunteer community uses open source tools to answer questions in a constantly evolving conversation, while at protests and actions "Street librarians" armed with tailor-made "Ready Reference Kits" are connected via cell phone to home support librarians who provide synchronous help. In both contexts we strive to reach an underserved population who may have limited access to trusted information.

Introduction and Background

Information-seeking processes in the 21st century are rapidly changing. Both the public and library workers are in a state of constant adjustment to new technologies and techniques for finding answers to questions. In this environment, librarians must make contact with their target base and work to best serve their needs. It is equally important to be cognizant of those who have easy access to information, computers and online resources and have been taught to use them, as well as those who have not.

Radical Reference (RR) is a specialized collective of library workers and library school students who use virtual and other reference services to reach out to members of its community. At the inception of RR, founders defined its patron base as political activists and independent journalists. RR was launched in July of 2004 to support the thousands of activists that converged to protest at the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC) in

New York City.¹ Librarians recognized a need for information services that would be available to all and accessible not just at a reference desk, but in the streets, cafes and parks where activists gathered. Street reference volunteers connected with a community typically under-served by traditional libraries. These "street librarians" were armed with "ready reference kits" specific to the RNC and were connected via cell phone to home support librarians who extended available information resources and provided synchronous communication.

RR was created to support activism, break down barriers to information and connect users with quality information regardless of their ability to locate trusted data on their own or access a physical library space. The project was well received at the RNC by activist communities, and RR volunteers have continued and expanded its services to include resources such as Web research guides and instruction sessions taught throughout the United States.

RR's most prominent service is online reference. As of April 2008, RR's collective had over 300 volunteers - library workers with a variety of professional backgrounds and the ability to answer queries in nine languages. RR supports activist communities, progressive organizations, and independent journalists by providing professional research support and education on access to and critical evaluation of information. The group works in a collaborative virtual setting, has no designated hierarchy, and uses open source tools in order to live its egalitarian mission, as opposed to simply espousing it. RR positions itself as the information source for independent journalists working with limited resources who want the best possible information with a quick turnaround time. RR provides not only reference service to these journalists but also fact-checking workshops that empower users to find and recognize trustworthy information available free via public libraries and the open Web.

RR subscribes to no one political philosophy, and the allegiances of individual members likely range from liberal Democrat to anarchist. Those active in RR believe that the struggle for social justice is relevant to librarianship and that librarians and library school students have the expertise to contribute to those working to foster a more equal society. RR does not subscribe to the notion that an MLS is a line in the sand demarcating who has authority to disseminate and procure information and who does not. Many members of RR are degreed librarians, but active members include students, library support staff, and librarians of life as well. For the purpose of this paper, the term "librarian" will apply to library staff and students as well as degreed librarians.

Despite the fact that RR is primarily a virtual community, local collectives have formed around the United States where members meet face to face and organize events and actions that connect them to one another and to their users. The most vibrant group is in New York City. Its members have presented workshops and skillshares up and down the East Coast of North America and beyond. Local collectives become more active when there is an event to drive them, as the protests of 2004 led to a committed New York-

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_Republican_National_Convention_protest_activity

based group of volunteers.

Although RR rejects a traditional hierarchical business model, there is a small core group of administrators who monitor the site, provide help to new members and coordinate ongoing projects such as website upgrades, fundraising and meetings at conferences. These moderators are geographically distant from one another but connect online and via telephone to collaborate on projects.

Radical Reference in Context

socially responsible projects within librarianship

There are multiple outlets for progressive librarianship in anglophone North America. The Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the American Library Association (ALA) was founded in 1969 and "has provided a home within ALA for progressive librarians, library workers, and supporters who agree to promote social responsibility as a core value of librarianship."² Among SRRT's activities is bringing resolutions to the ALA Council and the Membership. Past resolutions have covered a range of issues including apartheid in South Africa and the war on Iraq. There are six project-specific task forces operating under SRRT, and they put out a newsletter twice a year. SRRT offers a way to work towards an awareness of the importance of social responsibilities in librarianship from within the preeminent professional library association in the U.S.

The Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG) was created in 1990 and exists to "provid[e] a forum for the open exchange of radical views on library issues."³ A major PLG activity is publishing the peer-reviewed journal, *Progressive Librarian*. PLG is a dues-based membership organization governed by its Coordinating Committee. Both PLG and SRRT have active electronic discussion lists that provide online forums for their members to talk, argue and share information.

There are also many examples of socially responsible librarians and library advocates in the blogosphere. Jessamyn West's Librarian.net⁴ is one of the forerunners of activist library blogs and covers issues of relevance to socially responsible librarianship such as technology and its impact on rural and other libraries. Among other projects, West co-edited the *Revolting Librarians Redux* collection in 2003. Librarian Activist⁵ is a blog written by a small collective of Canadian library workers, covering political aspects of technology and information-seeking in Canada and the U.S. Rory Litwin, a member of SRRT and PLG, publishes the Library Juice blog⁶ (originally an online newsletter), where he discusses topics ranging from information as a public good to deprofessionalization in librarianship. Some RR members blog independently as well; a full list is available at <http://radicalreference.info/aggregator/sources>.

² <http://www.libr.org/srrt/about.html>

³ <http://libr.org/plg/index.php>

⁴ <http://librarian.net>

⁵ <http://www.librarianactivist.org/>

⁶ <http://libraryjuicepress.com/blog/>

RR is younger than SRRT and PLG. The project is free to join and takes very little effort to "join." In this decentralized group of somewhat like-minded individuals -- more a community of practice than an organization -- saying one is a "member" of RR doesn't involve much more than creating a username on the site, subscribing to the discussion list, and jumping in to answer a question or start up a local project. In addition to archived questions and answers, presentation materials, and pathfinders, the RR website contains short blog entries and report-backs from events.

virtual question-answering services

RR is one of many Web-based question-answering services. Many public and academic library systems now offer electronic "Ask A Librarian" services to their cardholders or the public. In the realm of unaffiliated services, multiple efforts have come forward with motives from profit-making to community-building.

Google developed Google Answers in 2002. In this example, money changed hands for successfully answered questions. Prices of questions were determined by the askers, and the Google Answers Researchers (GAR) could net anywhere from a few dollars to close to \$200 per question. Not surprisingly for a well-known name in Web products, Google's service was much-used and respected, attracting people -- including librarians -- who wanted to use their expertise and experience to assist others (and earn a little money). Answers were rated and tended to be fully articulated pieces with cited sources. Google Answers was closed in 2006, with former GARs launching Uclue⁷ soon after, using a similar payment model.

Yahoo! Answers⁸ is a popular and supported Web-based reference service with versions in almost 25 countries. This is the go-to place for a quick, free answer to simple questions. Answers tend to be short, and few include citations and are voted on, resulting in a "best" one for each resolved question. People can post questions that could charitably be described as unanswerable -- "Where were you my whole life???"

There are other ways entrepreneurs are developing products to satisfy Web users' desire for fast human help with information-seeking. An attempt to meld search engine and reference librarian is a business called ChaCha.⁹ "Guides" who are students, stay-at-home parents, and retirees¹⁰ text back answers to questions submitted by cell phone.

Librarians are also building online reference services. The Internet Public Library (IPL)¹¹ is an early example. IPL was founded in 1995 and is now managed by a consortium of universities with library and information studies programs. Submitted questions are not compiled on the site, apart from a selection in a "Frequently Asked Reference Questions"

⁷ <http://uclue.com/>

⁸ <http://answers.yahoo.com/>

⁹ <https://www.chacha.com/>

¹⁰ <http://ptech.allthingsd.com/20080424/if-you-have-chacha-and-a-cellphone-you-have-answers/>

¹¹ <http://ipl.org/>

section,¹² and the focus of IPL is creating pathfinders and link lists.

Jessamyn West, who was a Google Answers Researcher and wrote about her experience for Searcher,¹³ is one of three moderators for Ask Metafilter, or AskMeFi.¹⁴ Formed in 2003, Ask MetaFilter was the logical outcropping of the MetaFilter community web log. It quickly generated an active community that today numbers in the tens of thousands. An example of a highly functioning and exciting online community, Ask MetaFilter sees as many as 5000 "mefites" active on the site answering questions and querying the "hive mind" on a single day. Many answers are brief, but because Ask MetaFilter is a community where people feel more of a responsibility to one another than on other questions sites, answers are often given in seriousness and their very quantity insures a quality answer. Each user must pay a one-time fee of \$5 USD to register with the site.

With RR's virtual reference service, a community of library workers and students has come together to volunteer their time, expertise and resources. Questions submitted to the site are answered by one or more volunteers using an open source content management system that allows for an ongoing, evolving conversation between members of RR and the patron. Members strive to reach those who may have limited access to trusted information and to convey the information in a way that makes technology a means to an end, rather than a barrier.

RR has a commitment to providing complete, trustworthy answers with cited sources. Answers are often conversational in tone while at the same time emphasizing the research strategies undertaken to find the information. This balance between formal and informal is intended to demystify today's complicated information environment and empower the questioner to reproduce the search and interpret the results as best fits his or her need. Generally, the answerer avoids injecting personal analysis (except as suits the question itself) but always maps the methodology undertaken to arrive at the answer. RR members encourage askers to seek out additional sources, including those located in public libraries in the patron's own area if that is known, along with intelligent use of the open Web. While some RR patrons may prefer a simpler answer without the search strategy or list of sources articulated, the librarians believe the process of finding and interpreting information is as important as the answer to the question itself. By providing the tools to locate and interpret information, RR shares the tools of information and media literacy.

Challenges facing RR are that members come and go; there are issues with providing answers in a timely manner; and administrators may pull back from daily duties given the constraints of work, school or family. That said, the community is strong and evolving, with members ready to step up when others step back. The fluidity that comes into play when users are allowed to do the work that they can, when they can allows for a freedom and strength that makes this community vital. Key to retention and a robust organization is the need to stay enthusiastic and invested, and to encourage other members to feel the same. RR has successfully provided independent journalists with research assistance and

¹² <http://ipl.org/div/farq/>

¹³ <http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/oct02/west.htm>

¹⁴ <http://ask.metafilter.com>

resources and the ability to find information on their own. Like all volunteer-based projects, RR experiences both the good and the bad of being composed of people volunteering their spare time. Luckily, people bring energy and ideas because they want to, not because they are being paid to. Some librarians who cannot fully incorporate their values into their paid work come to volunteer for RR for that fulfillment, as RR is a space where questions are asked by people who share a commitment to social justice.

In the Streets and on the Web

In the Streets...

Activist events like protests are fluid and shifting. The range of information needed is broad and changing as well -- ranging from the specific "if I am riding my bike and am arrested, what law am I breaking?" to broad, "Why are these people protesting?" to mundane, "Where is the closest public restroom?" The means of providing information to answer these queries are varied as well. During the 2004 RNC, members of RR came prepared with ready reference kits of anticipated information while others set up home support for the street librarians. Home support members were at their computers, near or far from the protests, ready to provide information that could not be answered using the sheaf of prepared materials or from the street librarian's own knowledge. These volunteers signed up for short shifts, together covering the entire time the street librarians were out.

The alternate method used for gathering and disseminating information during the protest was through a synchronous Web-based messaging service, TXTmob, which "lets you quickly... share txt messages with friends, comrades, and total strangers [with a] format... similar to an email b[ulletin]-board system."¹⁵ Messages are sent simultaneously to multiple groups that need access to the same information at the same time. TXTmob was developed by the Institute for Applied Autonomy to support activists at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in 2004.¹⁶ The service allowed real-time reference help as well as information on peripheral yet equally important updates, such as: "the police have cordoned off 7th street and are arresting everyone they encounter." With the advent of new technologies come new possibilities in street reference. The presence of services that provide synchronous connectivity like Skype, a Web-based phone, text and video service, means that new methods of connecting are always on the horizon.

...and on the Web

The centerpiece of RR is its website. Every question submitted to RR is archived here, creating a knowledge base accessible to site visitors and online searchers. The website also contains a "reference shelf" of subject guides that cover topics from alternative bookstores and infoshops (community hubs of activist fliers, pamphlets and books), to history and resistance, to a comprehensive pathfinder for "green scare" resources. It is the questions and answers, however, that provide the most dynamic resource and that make up the bulk of the content on the site.

¹⁵ <http://www.txtmob.com/>

¹⁶ <http://www.appliedautonomy.com/>

The process for answering questions has evolved over the years. At the outset, everything was done by email. A submitted question would trigger an email message to an alias @radicalreference.info address. Subsequently one of the core administrators receiving the query would forward the message to the electronic list. From there, an RR member interested in claiming the question would reply-all with "GOT IT" in the subject line. In this manner, everyone on the list would receive each question and determine if their skill set or resources matched the question. Generally each question found a single answerer, however, on some occasions a question would sit in members' inboxes with no action, forcing a site administrator to re-send the question.

At that time the main benefit of forwarding all questions to the RR list was that members were prompted to come out of the virtual woodwork and claim questions that jibed with their personal interests and/or expertise. Nevertheless, the process eventually was determined to be inefficient and causing of both inertia and dropped questions. The next method was a software solution that used the open source tool Lightning Bug (LB).¹⁷ The developers of LB created it to manage part of the CounterConvention website during the RNC. These activists live in New York City and are a subset of the InterActivist Network,¹⁸ the technology collective that supports RR. With LB, RR librarians operated using a rotating list in order to answer assigned questions. Members would receive an email alerting them to the presence of a new question in their LB account, and would have 48 hours to change its answer. If there was no action during that time period the question would "escalate" and be visible to all members with LB log-ins.

With this system, RR members could no longer lurk without participating (though they did have the choice to register with LB or not), and questions could be distributed in a more equitable manner. However, the software did not entirely meet the needs of a virtual collaborative reference service. One concern was that since LB assigned the next question to the user who had last answered one, new RR members invariably had to be responsible for handling a question immediately upon signing up to the site. Furthermore, LB was not as conducive to collaboration on answers, and the quantity of escalated questions indicated that the pressure of having a question all to oneself was not improving the quality and timeliness of answers after all. All of these issues contributed to RR members' decision to move to an entirely online question-answering process; Ask MetaFilter was in fact an inspiration for the change.

Currently, questions are submitted through a webform and have four required fields, in addition to optional fields (e.g. "how did you hear about us?"). People must give a title for their question, a time frame for when they need an answer, email address, and, of course, the question itself. No username is required to submit a question, the field names are in English and Spanish and the only technical requirements are Internet access and an email address. Access to computers and the Internet is not a universal privilege; however, as RR is a geographically disparate group, email is the most practical channel of communication at this time.

¹⁷ <http://lightningbug.sourceforge.net>

¹⁸ <http://www.interactivist.net>

Throughout the process RR members may seek clarification on a question, just as librarians conduct reference interviews with patrons in any setting. After posting an answer to the site, an RR member will decide whether his or her answer is complete enough to warrant changing the question status to "answered." If it is not, the answer appears online but the question remains in the "unanswered" list. Since the answers are online, the questioner (and anyone else) can view the progress of the question. The questioner receives an email from the RR member who completes the question and marks it "answered."

The spirit of collaboration that RR saw with street reference is also present on its website. Many questions are answered with the aid of internal notes (viewable only by authenticated members) allowing a virtual conversation among librarians to take place. RR members have different areas of expertise and interest, and there is an attempt to use many minds to put together a quality answer. The RR email list is also a necessary tool for communication, used to remind fellow members of pending questions on the site and to ask for help, for example, in accessing a particular document held in an unavailable database.

While RR operates from a Left perspective, the librarians' goal is to answer questions to the best of their professional ability and supply the public with search strategies and skills for finding valuable information on their own. As activists with social justice values, RR members understand that there is a pantheon of underrated alternative resources -- books, websites, databases, and more -- that are ignored in mainstream culture. However, it is not necessarily RR's intent to promote "left-wing" sources over "regular" resources. The best tools and strategies available are used to answer a question as thoroughly as possible. The question of who is reporting on a topic, or where information is being published, or how data is gathered and distributed cannot always be divided into sources that are socially responsible and those that are not.

RR members promote the service via email lists as well as by distributing fliers at events and in activist spaces. RR has also been the subject of articles in the alternative press, such as the magazines *Clamor* and *Bitch*. Often people do not give clues in their questions to determine how they heard about the group, who they are and how they plan to use the information they will get, but excerpts are available that show RR is reaching its target patron base:

- "I do research for Mumia Abu-Jamal's books and radio commentaries..."¹⁹
- "I'm working with a writer on an article about the reforms to the Rockefeller Drug Laws that were recently signed into law."²⁰
- "I'm working on an article on the radical right on college campuses for an upcoming indy article."²¹
- "I'm writing on propagandist preparation of the Iraq war by the INC/NeoCon

¹⁹ <http://radicalreference.info/node/1203>

²⁰ <http://radicalreference.info/node/559>

²¹ <http://radicalreference.info/node/508>

- complex."²²
- "I am working on a zine and I need a little direction."²³
 - "I'm looking for historic images of NYC for a documentary that I'm working on for my group, Heads On Fire."²⁴
 - "[M]y video collective is making a documentary on military recruitment and possibly on the draft..."²⁵
 - "Hi, yep I'm a student -- library and info studies no less -- but am stumped on this one and figure you can help."²⁶

The question from a library school student also indicates that RR is seen as a venue where colleagues collaborate and help one another. In a few cases, members actually know questioners, strengthening the real-life bonds between library workers and activists. A writer in New York City, for example, has submitted several questions to RR over the years, asking about media coverage of prisoners' hunger strikes, statistics on battered women, and legal cases on prisoner abuse. Thanks in part to RR's research assistance, her book about resistance among women in prison will be published later this year.

Frequently, questions are asked in a manner that implicitly or overtly assumes political affinity between the questioner and RR librarians, as in one that states, "I need some information on the Military Commissions Act of 2006 so I can defend my abhorrence of it in a knowledgeable fashion".²⁷ Another says, "The liberals are making noises about blaming anarchists and radicals for any rowdiness that may happen at the RNC protests",²⁸ expressing a point familiar to activists but not necessarily to the mainstream that there is a wide gap of mistrust between "liberals" and those who are decidedly on the extreme political left.

Questions are international in scope and cover many topics, from the Iraq war to cocaine to Czech anarchists. Many involve subjects that are current issues in North American activism, such as the criminal justice system (including library services to prisoners), immigration and the environment. RR has provided resources for alternative charitable giving in the areas of Hurricane Katrina relief (2005) and aid to post-election chaos in Kenya (2008).

Given RR's roots in the actions around the 2004 RNC, many questions have been submitted by activists preparing for demonstrations. Among other things, these have covered the history of silent actions as a form of protest,²⁹ whether NYC Police Commissioner Ray Kelly had a son who was himself planning to protest³⁰ and age-

²² <http://radicalreference.info/node/91>

²³ <http://radicalreference.info/node/241>

²⁴ <http://radicalreference.info/node/562>

²⁵ <http://radicalreference.info/node/30>

²⁶ <http://radicalreference.info/node/329>

²⁷ <http://radicalreference.info/node/1301>

²⁸ <http://radicalreference.info/node/74>

²⁹ <http://radicalreference.info/node/417>

³⁰ <http://radicalreference.info/node/31>

related legal issues for a 16-year-old protestor.³¹

In keeping with RR's identification as a collective of library workers, many questions have been about books and reading materials. Several people have asked about reading lists, particularly for young people: progressive or radical books for a 6-year-old,³² alternative perspectives on relationships and sex for a 15-year-old,³³ a good primer on imperialism³⁴, books explaining progressive issues to teenagers,³⁵ and more.

Non-librarians as well as librarians have approached RR with questions about library issues. The question of balance in library collections has been covered in a discussion about getting alternative materials into libraries³⁶ and about adding a map called The People's Guide to the RNC to library collections.³⁷ People have asked about creating a radical lending library in New York City,³⁸ and whether anyone has studied the information-seeking behavior of activists.³⁹ Some questions reference recent and historical political influences on librarianship, such as the PATRIOT Act and library patron data⁴⁰ and FBI visits to libraries.⁴¹ RR also turned (with permission) a discussion from the Library Underground email list into a document on the site: "Why do we need librarians and libraries anymore now that we have the Internet?"⁴²

Technology and Open Source

Similar to the concept of social responsibilities in a theoretically neutral field like librarianship is the idea of technology as an ideological tool. While staff at the libraries that use the proprietary Microsoft Windows software -- by far the most common operating system -- may believe that they're making unbiased technology decisions, library workers and others who use free software are aware of political implications of these decisions. Free/libre open source software (FLOSS) is best thought of as being free as in speech, not as in lunch. In other words, lack of cost alone does not make something "free"; rather, it is the philosophy of openness and liberty behind the software that counts. The generally agreed-upon criteria of FLOSS are the following,⁴³ that one is free to:

- Read source code and evaluate it for security and other reasons
- Modify source code for your own use
- Distribute your modifications

³¹ <http://radicalreference.info/node/29>

³² <http://radicalreference.info/node/1999>

³³ <http://radicalreference.info/node/15>

³⁴ <http://radicalreference.info/node/899>

³⁵ <http://radicalreference.info/node/162>

³⁶ <http://radicalreference.info/node/2135>

³⁷ <http://radicalreference.info/node/149>

³⁸ <http://radicalreference.info/node/703>

³⁹ <http://radicalreference.info/node/514>

⁴⁰ <http://radicalreference.info/node/469>

⁴¹ <http://radicalreference.info/node/166>

⁴² <http://radicalreference.info/internetvslibrary>

⁴³ <http://www.fsf.org/licensing/essays/free-sw.html>

- Anyone for any use

RR uses open source and/or non-commercial software and Web hosting as much as possible. The technology collective InterActivist Network hosts the RR website at no charge, and the only consistent cost incurred is domain registration, at less than \$20/year.

The site is written in PHP with a MySQL database backend, and it uses Drupal,⁴⁴ an open source content management system. Drupal provides tools for blogging, content creation, site design and organization and user management. Every member of RR can create content -- answers to questions, subject guides for the "reference shelf," blog posts, and other pages. The decentralized set-up allows people to immediately implement ideas, such as a guide to alternative video archives and blog posts about a Library of Congress subject heading action.

An option for contacting RR besides email and webforms, as well as for communication among RR volunteers, is instant messaging (IM), using Gaim⁴⁵ and other open source IM clients.

Moving Even Farther From The Desk: If Reference, Then Why Not Instruction?

An exciting outcome of RR's service is the opportunity to share skills with the broader activist and information professional communities. Almost all of these appearances represent contact with non-traditional and underserved populations -- most adults do not have the affiliations with colleges and universities that allow them access to the rich print and electronic collections of academic libraries, and many community activists do not look to public libraries to assist with the research that will shape their campaigns. RR functions as a way to promote these services.

Recent RR presentations and skillshares include the following:

- RR was a coalition partner for the 2008 NYC Grassroots Media Conference, helping plan and execute this annual event, and conducted two workshops, "Radical Reference Presents: The 2008 Grassroots Media Election Guide" and "Alternative Voices on the Internet: Managing the News Online".
- The Women and Media Conference in 2008 provided an opportunity to teach "FACT-UP: Fact Check, Research and Thinking Critically like a Radical Librarian," which introduced fact-checking skills and research strategies to both storied reporters and novices.
- RR members helped plan the first and second (2007 and 2008) NYC Anarchist Bookfairs, presenting a workshop called "The Importance of Community Needs Assessment in Activist Work" in 2008.

⁴⁴ <http://www.drupal.org>

⁴⁵ <http://gaim.sourceforge.net/about.php>

- At the Mid Atlantic Radical Bookfair in 2007, RR members, along with other information and library advocates, conducted a panel discussion on social equality and radical services as a form of activism.
- The US Social Forum of 2007 saw an ambitious librarian effort led by members of RR and PLG. One goal was to collect materials from the forum itself to preserve and archive this social movement history. Another was to survey forum attendees on attitudes towards activism, libraries, and information-seeking.⁴⁶ A third was to provide reference services in the forum's Media Justice Center; including conducting the workshop "Media Essentials: Research and Fact-Checking."

A full list of RR appearances is available at <http://radicalreference.info/rrpresentations>.

While public libraries may offer free instruction on computers and navigating the Internet, these classes are not available to those who work or go to school during library hours, and they are not appealing to those whose skills are more advanced or whose interests are more focused than typical public library classes can satisfy. The workshops and skillshares that RR members conduct are a way for library workers to assist some of the many non-traditional patrons who either don't use libraries or don't get everything they need out of them. At the same time, the aim is to illustrate the importance of librarian expertise and library services, such as free access to subscription databases. All handouts and slides are available on the website, making RR's virtual presence a repository of its face-to-face instruction that then becomes available to anyone with an Internet connection.

In addition to conferences and bookfairs, RR members participate in activist campaigns as RR librarians. These activities are important to RR members, who are often part of the activist communities they serve. For example, the New York collective is periodically approached by the NYC Independent Media Center⁴⁷ to provide research support for their newspaper, and it was called upon to catalog the collection of documents, videos, and periodicals archived by a local environmental group. An RR member in Boston helped coordinate the Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) Winter Soldier campaign⁴⁸ earlier this year.

Conclusion

Librarians are educators, stewards of literacy and protectors of freedom of information and as such hold the key to a continuing dialog with the public concerning the right to access information regardless of privilege or location. Technology may be the issue that both drives this right and divides us. In the U.S. the number of households that have a

⁴⁶ http://radicalreference.info/information_needs_survey

⁴⁷ <http://nyc.indymedia.org/en/index.html>

⁴⁸ <http://ivaw.org/wintersoldier>

computer in the home continues to rise,⁴⁹ and yet in other parts of the world these numbers are drastically lower. One cannot deny that the ability to penetrate the barriers to relevant and trusted information may lie in the ability to access and use a computer. RR works to extend information literacy with the understanding that information has an inherent bias. With a dearth of guidance in the face of an expanding river of information, and with more and more organizations geared towards answering questions posed by the general population, RR has become an invaluable tool to a targeted base. By collaborating with journalists and activists, RR volunteers serve a population advocating for social justice both within and outside of the mainstream system of information-gathering and reporting. A cyclical building of knowledge perpetuating change is the cornerstone to worldwide information literacy, and RR continues to work towards this goal.

⁴⁹ <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p23-208.pdf>