

Radical Reference: taking information to the street
Radical Reference Collective (Shinjoung Yeo, Joel Rane, James R. Jacobs, Lia Friedman, Jenna Freedman)
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Radical Reference (RR) is a volunteer-run collective of library workers (Librarians, support staff, and LIS students) who believe in social justice and equality. RR provides reference service and information access to independent journalists, activists and the general public via its web site and on the street at political events. RR was launched in July, 2004 to assist and support the many activists and the public converging on New York City to protest at the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC). During the RNC, RR volunteers went out to the streets and provided reference service to out-of-towners, journalists and anyone with a question. This “street reference” was conducted using carefully crafted “ready reference kits” that included maps, transportation information, lists of emergency phone numbers, etc. Teams of home support volunteers were on call for questions that could not be readily answered with the information on hand. Additionally, home support acted as a virtual affinity group by monitoring local mainstream and alternative media to keep street reference informed about various events and police activities.

In less than a year, RR has become known in activist communities that recognize the critical role that information professionals play in the movement for social justice. In light of this, RR has expanded its services to include fact-checking workshops and skill-sharing sessions on infoshops, alternative library resources and fact-checking at American Library Association (ALA) conferences. There are future plans for copyright activism sessions at ALA as well as projects as diverse as indexing alternative media resources and creating an image archive for the NY City Independent Media Center (NYCIMC). Today, there are over 150 volunteers across the United States with a variety of professional backgrounds and the ability to provide services in 10 languages.

There are three major factors that have led to the group’s success: the recognition of community needs; collaboration among RR volunteers and with other groups to meet those needs; and the implementation of open-source technologies to facilitate the group’s work in a virtual environment.

Recognition of community needs

RR emerged within the context of the current political and social environment in which civil rights are under attack, corporatized media are failing to inform citizens and information has become a commodity to be bought and sold. RR library workers advocate for the public interest and support activist communities through the use of their professional skills and expertise.

There are many activist organizations and individuals that rely on quality information for much of their work. However, few organizations have access to reliable and diverse

information resources or the time and skill sets to obtain that information. By identifying this information need, RR has been able to fill an important niche. RR volunteers have attended meetings of various local activist organizations and participated in local events. As a result of this direct interaction and participation, RR has become integral to activist communities. More importantly, RR has been able to provide services that are responsive and reactive to these communities. For instance, at the request of media activists in NYC, RR began providing research and fact-checking workshops to teach activists how to locate, analyze, and verify information sources. RR believes that, in order to invigorate and empower communities that are underserved, it is crucial to get them to recognize their needs within themselves.

Collaboration

One of RR's strengths is its commitment to collaboration. From the beginning, RR has worked closely with other organizations involved in the planning for the RNC convergence and has continued to seek out opportunities to work with other groups. For instance, RR and Boston IMC organized a screening at the Lucy Parsons infoshop of the film, "Eyes on the Prize" – a documentary that has not been publicly shown for over 10 years due to copyright restrictions. This screening was part of the nationwide event "Eyes on the Screen" organized by Downhill Battle. As part of the event, RR led a discussion on copyright and its effect on public access to information.

There is also much collaboration among the 150 volunteers who have diverse skill sets and social and political backgrounds. RR's reference system is designed specifically to tap into this collective knowledge base by allowing for various avenues of input by multiple volunteers in order to provide a wide range of resources to questioners. In addition, during events, street reference and home support work closely together to ensure quality service.

Open source technologies

As a largely virtual community, RR services and collaboration could not happen without the creative use of Internet technologies. RR has consciously decided to utilize open source and/or non-commercial software and web hosting.

RR's website content is managed by Drupal, software developed and maintained by a community and distributed under the GNU General Public License. This software is written in PHP with a mysql database backend and integrated with various features such as a blog, wiki-like collaborative book modules, and other collective tools. RR is poised to become only the second organization to implement new software called Lightning Bug to better facilitate and track reference transactions among volunteers. In addition, during political events, Txtmob, a web-based cell phone text messaging service, is used to provide synchronous communication between street librarians and home support and the greater communications network connecting many other affinity groups together. Last but not least, RR web hosting, technology support and software development of lightning

bug is provided gratis by Interactivist, a non-profit organization that supports groups working toward issues of social justice.

In the name of convenience, libraries often overlook the underlying philosophy and principles of the technologies they employ. RR provides a good example for how an organization can infuse its technologies with its organizational philosophy.

What's in a name?

Some have questioned the use of the term “radical” in RR’s name and have not been able to get beyond the term to see RR’s utility.

Interestingly, the term “radical,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, has the following meanings: “going to the root or origin; touching or acting upon what is essential and fundamental; thorough.” In its botanical and biological senses, it means going to the root in order to nourish the entire body. It is not until the early 20th century that it emerged as a political term that now wrongly carries with it a negative or extreme connotation. As discordia, a RR volunteer, said in response to a comment about RR on the LISNews.com site,

“... language is not a static thing; rather, it is a place where social struggle takes place. The term itself is interpreted within a specific social context. By using the term "radical" to define our service, we are challenging the mainstream meaning which largely marginalizes the term and along with it certain groups.”

[<http://www.lisnews.com/article.pl?sid=04/08/01/0640217&mode=thread&tid=28>]

As the original meaning of “radical” implies, the goal of RR’s work is to go to the roots of our communities who thirst for information access in order to affect a growth of the entire community.

Conclusion

In the midst of social and political turmoil, we believe that library workers have a professional duty to reach out to local communities and to use their skills and knowledge in order to foster a more egalitarian society. Radical Reference has become a place where anyone can ask a question and expect a carefully researched answer. This adaptation of traditional reference is a new and greatly needed service that provides information to support not only independent journalists and progressive organizations, but also students, teachers and those wanting access to information that can be challenging to find. Radical Reference strives to work within communities to strengthen the idea that knowledge is power and that information should be free to all. The organization continues to evolve and grow. We welcome others to join us in working to make information activism a part of every community. Those interested should contact RR at info@radicalreference.info.

For more information please visit the following Web sites:

- Radical Reference: <http://radicalreference.info>
- Drupal: <http://drupal.org/>
- Eyes on the Screen: <http://www.downhillbattle.org/eyes/>
- Independent Media Center: <http://www.indymedia.org/>
- Interactivist: <http://www.interactivist.net/>
- Lucy Parsons Center: <http://www.lucyparsons.org/>
- Txtmob: <http://www.txtmob.com/>