

What's information got to go with it?

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The call for papers for this issue referenced the Arab Spring as an example of what happens when people come together to overthrow an oppressive regime. As 2011 comes to a close, it seems that the entire world is fighting something—but what can we truly name as a success? At the time of this writing, we have seen governments overthrown in Egypt, Tunisia, and there have only been partial (if that) resolutions to the problems in the Middle East—violent eruptions have occurred periodically since the Arab Spring and true democracy isn't yet in place. Around the world, the Occupy Movement is fully underway, illustrating the breadth of the struggle against the capitalist machine that separates the 1% from the 99%—the very small number of haves against the languishing middle and lower classes. It seems that democracy is elusive around the world, even as people who turn a blind eye to the realities of the poor celebrate its triumph.

This issue is the result of an international exchange that occurred last summer, when Melanie Brooks and I took twelve students from the University of Missouri to England and Scotland to visit libraries and learn how libraries in the United Kingdom are working with, and for, social change in the midst of an economic crisis. One focus of the trip was social justice, specifically related to libraries and information work. Class readings covered social change in both the British and U.S. contexts. We were fortunate to be able to talk to librarians who had participated in the Quality Leaders Project, “Skills for a Globalised World: Relevant Skills for Public Library Staff” at the Barking Learning Center. We participated in a workshop led by John Vincent and Anne Harding, and visited several other libraries that had won CILIP's Libraries Change Lives Award. In the end, though, what affected the students most deeply wasn't planned; the riots that erupted in the boroughs of London while we were there explicitly addressed the concepts of social exclusion in British society that we had been reading about. We moved out of London and watched buildings burn on TV for the next several nights, from our rooms in Leeds, Edinburgh, and York. The riots, spurred by anger about inequalities and cultural differences, rattled our nerves and provided food for thought that we hadn't anticipated.

Media, communication, and information have been vitally important in creating and sustaining these social movements that have rocked the world. Some of the movements have been destructive and ultimately senseless (i.e., the London riots) and others have torn down regimes whose power was reinforced by massive military fortresses (i.e., Libya). There is a common thread running through all of the unrest, though; the movements stem from

economic injustices that have been reinforced by neoliberal economic policies. People are sick of being taken advantage of.

As librarians and information workers, we must ask what role we can play in remedying some of the problems that are plaguing the world. One obvious answer is in the libraries that are providing the knowledge needed for citizens to arm themselves against a winner-takes-all capitalist system; in this sense, the occupy libraries are playing an important role. The library at the center of the storm near Wall Street was destroyed by police on November 15, but was immediately rebuilt. American Libraries reports on Zuccotti Park: "Amidst it all, there was also a functioning library, a small one under fire, but a library just the same. While the future of the Wall Street occupation is unclear, these protesters still believe in what libraries offer everyone. For these activists "The library is open" has become a battle cry."

This issue offers some really interesting and varied ideas about both the problems of the political and social landscape and some solutions through media, communication, and libraries. Income inequalities are the crux of the problems we are seeing today around the world; John Pateman demonstrates, through an international comparison of various indices of library use and income gaps, that countries with the lowest disparities of income have the highest rates of library use; public expenditures on education and a commitment to an equitable income distribution result in wider cultural participation. Pateman addresses the inequalities in the U.K., while Susan Maret looks to those in the United States, recognizing the potential for librarians, as agents of the democracy and human development, to be an important part in societal change toward meeting UNESCO's stated 2015 Millennium Development Goals.

Communication and access to knowledge is of course central to libraries. Sean Burns discusses open-source software and information retrieval systems as a means to circumvent this control and place it back in the hands of the library and its users. Kristine Stewart and Benjamin Richardson explore the potential for human libraries to provide access to human life experience—through direct communication with a person whose life experience is different from someone with whom a library user might not normally talk. Niran Adetoro studies the availability of non-print material for visually impaired people in Nigeria—concluding that, from a basic human rights standpoint, there is a vast need for more of such materials.

Finally, Toni Samek and Anthony Worman, recognizing the potential of exploitation of workers as a bi-product of a shift to a digital workplace, ask if and how LIS educators in Canada and the United States are addressing workplace issues in this new labour landscape. They find that educators might be too complacent, or even perpetuate, the seepage of librarians' skills to profit-driven IT companies.

In conclusion, let's turn again to the Study Abroad program that preceded this intercontinental collaboration (and guest editorial). We live in a global society. "Think globally, act locally" has been a mantra of activists for years; it's as relevant now as ever, as demonstrated by the global marketplaces and economic collapses that have caused the recent turmoil. Travel, involvement, and engagement with colleagues from around the world are one way for us as students, librarians, and information workers to really understand the global nature of the problems that are specific to our work. Such engagement allows us to

see, first-hand, variations on a theme--how people in other countries handle issues such as dwindling public funding, cultural diversity, and social justice. Our students learned that public libraries in the U.S. and England might have come of age during the same era, but that we have a lot to learn from each other; our funding structures and relationships with our cities are quite different. Our present and future is of course marked by change, and widening our perspective beyond the familiar is instructive on many levels.

In 1966, William McCormack wrote: “In view of the leadership the professions exert in modern society and the increasing political and economic participation of the United States in world affairs, it can be argued that the need to establish opportunities for students in the professions to study abroad is as great as in other departments of the university, if not greater. Most of the problems we face today, whether they are related to the challenges posed by overpopulation, disease, Communism, or even the renewal of American cities, will depend in large part for their solution upon comparative studies and co-operation in many fields on a world scale.” As we see it, today’s issue is not encroaching Communism, but rather an encroaching and all-consuming capitalism that threatens the existence of a healthy public sphere. Whether or not we agree with various protesters or specific movements, we must recognize the dissatisfaction regarding the worldwide economy and the affect that privatization and inequalities are having on the health of democracy. Information workers must strive to maintain public spaces—both locally and globally. Viva la revolution!

References:

McCormack, W 1966 ‘New Directions in Study Abroad: Opportunities for Students in the Professional Schools’, *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 37, no. 7, p. 369 – 376. Available in JSTOR.

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