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### **Title**

Radical Reference: Who Cares?

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gn7r9n2>

### **ISBN**

978-1-936117-87-1

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### **Publication Date**

2014-02-17

# Radical Reference: Who Cares?

*Lia Friedman*

## Radical Reference in the Beginning

Radical Reference (RR) is an unaffiliated and intentionally unorganized "organization" of library workers that supports the information needs of activists and independent journalists. Its origin lies with one librarian's desire to connect with the protest movement developing around the Republican National Convention (RNC) in New York City in 2004. At the time, local activists were outraged that the Republicans planned to come to New York in what they perceived as an exploitation of the site and memory of the terror of 9/11; Jenna Freedman wanted to be involved—and came up with this:

From: Jenna Freedman  
Sent: Tuesday, May 25, 2004 7:50 PM  
To: plg-nyc@lists.riseup.net  
Subject: [plg-nyc] radical reference

Hi All,

I went to the most recent clearinghouse meeting of the groups organizing against the Republican National Convention, and I left the meeting inspired, but also wondering what kind of role I could take. To paraphrase Phil Ochs, "Then I remembered I was a librarian."

That's when I came up with this idea of doing "radical reference." Before the Convention it could be a web-based service where people e-mail us their questions, and we attempt to answer them, or at least refer them. At the convention we could do the kind of on-the-street reference that Jessamyn West practiced in Seattle at the WTO protests. (I've got an e-mail out to her asking for more details.)

Do either of these plans appeal to anyone? I thought we could start with NYC folks, but there's no reason to limit the "virtual" part of it. In fact, I'd like to enlist some more tech savvy people to come up with an interface, and we'd definitely benefit from having some law librarians among us.

I mentioned the idea to an activist friend who is organizing with a SF Bay contingent, and he immediately submitted the questions below. They're not actually what I imagined; they're much more involved!

I'd love to hear what you think and if you'd be interested in participating.

All my best, Jenna

PS The Phil Ochs reference is to his intro to the Canons of Christianity on I don't remember which album.

Freedman received some positive responses from the NYC chapter of the Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG) and the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the American Library Association (ALA) which were seen as possible homes for the service. But between concerns that ALA's 501(c)(3) status might be jeopardized by hosting a project focused specifically on a political party convention, the potential inability to create a new task force or initiative between ALA meetings, and the fact that PLG and SRRT had similar leadership, it seemed best to develop RR as a separate and (we believed) short-term project. It wasn't until June 2004, after getting support from likely RR patrons at the Allied Media Conference (AMC)

in Bowling Green, OH, and then librarian collaborators at the ALA conference in Orlando, FL, that the project began to take shape. Members of the NYC Independent Media Center and Paper Tiger Television were excited about the prospect of librarians serving as researchers and fact-checkers for journalists at the convergence space being set up to serve independent media reporting on the RNC, and that enthusiasm spurred the project forward.

Encouraged by AMC attendees' interest, Freedman met with other librarians, notably James R. Jacobs, Chuck Munson, and Shinjoung Yeo, at the ALA conference that June, and they began the collaboration that would inform the shape of the project for years to come. Munson put out a call to a radical tech list to solicit a Web developer for the project and was quickly answered by Eric Goldhagen from the InterActivist Network in NYC. InterActivist used free and open source tools exclusively, and the idea of code and tools that were freely shared without anyone deriving profit, other than billing for their labor, seemed in line with the values of librarianship that we hold dear. Soon after, the nascent group had a functioning Drupal website, possibly the first installation of Drupal in service of a library or library project.

Then, in July 2004, Freedman and others sent emails to activist librarian and NYC-area email lists, calling for participation in RR (which is where I came in, as a library school student looking to bring past social justice experience to present practice):

FROM: Jenna Freedman  
TO: a-librarians@lists.mutualaid.org, plg-nyc@lists.riseup.net  
Tuesday, July 27, 2004 9:17 PM

Sorry for the cross-posting, but please forward to other lists that you think would be interested.

#### RADICAL REFERENCE

Library workers are launching a project in support of the demonstrations surrounding the Republican National Convention in New York City August 29-September 2, 2004.

We will offer blog, chat, street, and news reference, responding to questions from demonstrators. Sound ambitious? It is, so we need help.

Please contact [info@radicalreference.info](mailto:info@radicalreference.info) if you would like to:

- answer e-mail reference questions
- use your foreign language skills to answer questions and make the site more accessible
- perform chat reference
- participate in street reference
- be a news librarian, teaching and researching for independent media journalists
- help with the website
- gather "Quick Facts & Contacts" info for street reference
- rally together as library workers at the protests
- send us money (for hats to identify us, materials, technical costs)

All will be welcome to participate regardless of skill level or proximity to NYC. Indicate in your message in which areas you will participate.

NOTE: our website [www.radicalreference.info](http://www.radicalreference.info) is under construction. We hope to have it ready to receive reference questions by the end of the week.

And thus Radical Reference in its earliest iteration was formed. Volunteer librarians came together in the pre (for most) smartphone era to assemble "ready reference kits" that could be carried during the RNC protests and contained maps, legal information, lists of events, and more. These street reference volunteers were connected by phone to home support volunteers, who made themselves and their computers available to answer questions. Some also used the now-defunct synchronous Web-based messaging service TXTmob,

which was developed by the Institute for Applied Autonomy to support activists at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in 2004. Messages could be sent simultaneously to multiple groups that needed access to the same information at the same time. This pre-Twitter service allowed real-time reference help as well as the distribution of information on peripheral yet important updates like, “The police have cordoned off 37th Street and are arresting everyone.”

So RR filled a need that perhaps we hadn't known existed. Up to this point, most modern reference was a role filled by “professionals” behind a desk. Information was selectively freed from shelves and firewalls by those trained and given the keys to do so. Other ways of gathering specialized information existed in the early 2000s, of course—outside traditional libraries—but much of it was sequestered in databases, cataloged using antique classifications and written for scholars. What RR strove to do, perhaps unknowingly in some cases, was to liberate access to information in unique ways. To take the ability to find and understand information outside of brick and mortar institutions and bring it straight to a perceived need. Protestors on the street have to know, when a police officer decides to confiscate a bicycle in a bike lane during a protest and threatens violators with imprisonment or impoundment, if that is legal or not. They can hope to come to an action having sought out and remembered potential information needs, but unanticipated experiences are part and parcel of protests. So seeing someone with a sign reading “Info Here” became an unexpected but instantly useful resource. It is hard to imagine in this hyperconnected year of 2013, but ubiquitous, at-your-fingers information just didn't exist for most, especially those in the margins. Connecting those with limited access to information (whether geographically, being on the street, or monetarily, unable to be affiliated with an academic institution or lacking an address and thus without a public library card) was a way of balancing the scales, flattening the information hierarchy and giving more power to more people.

## **RR's Place in Alternative Library Models**

RR is not the only group of political/activist/alternative librarians in town. Within the North American anglophone context, we could place ourselves in a group that includes Ask MetaFilter (one of the first and best crowdsourcing Q&A models); SRRT and its sub-units (e.g. the Feminist Task Force); ALA's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT); ALA's Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship (COSWL); PLG; library unionists, ALA's ethnic caucuses (e.g. the Black Caucus of the ALA and the Asian Pacific American Libraries Association); the philanthropic partiers of the Desk Set and Que(e)ry in NYC; the less philanthropically-minded but possibly harder-partying ALA Think Tankers (aka the Drink Tank); legislatively-focused efforts from the ALA Washington Office and the EveryLibrary political action committee; zine librarians; the Internet Archive and San Francisco's Prelinger Archive, where ephemera and documents of social importance are saved, collected, and, most importantly, arranged with the user in mind; open source coders and Code4Lib; and the librarians of Occupy Wall Street and books-to-prisoners projects around North America.

Providing a comprehensive list of alternative libraries and library models is out of the scope of this chapter, but I do want to situate RR within the contemporary library activism landscape and examine what connects us. Like many of these other initiatives, RR exists on the Web and not in a physical space. When organizing a day of working on the site and answering questions, an actual space must be found. In NYC for example, that space was often ABC No Rio, a collectively-run arts and activism center that RR allied itself with early on. We also don't “create” anything, at least in a traditional publishing sense. RR archives all of

our questions and answers; creates “ready reference” guides on subjects often asked about or seen as useful by members who have a certain expertise or desire to learn about a topic; and documents our presentations, which often include detailed handouts. So the connection between RR and other alternative library projects ends up being the different modes and ideas surrounding access—access in its broadest sense, encompassing physical access, but also the examination of the ways in which information is “protected” and certain types of it are marginalized in academia.

## **Radical Reference, Success and Failure**

So how are we doing? RR's intentional under-organization makes calling it an “organization” paradoxical. Many of those who created the group identified with anarchist tenets or at least had hopes of flattened hierarchies, with no leaders per se, and so the group has moved forward with loose ideas of leadership and power guiding us. From its beginning as a project supporting protestors and organizers out on the street, a small number of volunteers built and have maintained the RR website, added members, and monitored questions and answers, as well as moved RR forward into a group that presents nationally and worldwide, forms local collectives centered on specific work, and occasionally operates in its original form as a street reference service. As RR grew and more volunteers were added, and these local collectives formed, workshops and projects were completed and its organizational ungainliness began (and continues) to be both a natural part of a group committed to limited “leadership” and an issue to grapple with. The RR website currently lists over 15 local collectives, some far more active than others. There are approximately 200 email list members, of which a dozen or so could be considered working members. This divide, between “members”—those who have signed up for a username and been added to the list but who have never participated by answering a question—and those dozen active members who take the brunt of deleting spam, farming out questions, and moderating the site in general, is an ongoing challenge. There are also those members, who, while active in local collectives and organizing events, have not been active on the site, answering questions. Our staffing model creates a continuous problem for the core group: how to balance answering the questions we receive with the number of volunteers who are willing to give time and are comfortable negotiating the RR site. This can be further exacerbated by media or professional coverage. For example, when we present or write about RR, it results in an uptick in visibility and traffic—will there then be an adequate amount of people ready to take on this work? Historically, this sense of stability has ebbed and flowed. After members deliver a paper or conduct a workshop, new volunteers may feel excited and energized—ready to start taking on questions—but that enthusiasm typically dies down as real life and other responsibilities make themselves known. Solutions to this problem have been mulled over by RR members but not yet implemented; for instance, we have considered making it mandatory for new members to answer one question per month, but then we balk at creating strict guidelines. Many projects taken up by local collectives over the years have been successful.

In 2009, members of the RR collective in Portland, OR, organized and created a lending library of books and other resources at Bitch Magazine, a respected feminist publication. The publisher at that time, Debbie Rasmussen, stated:

[Radical Reference] brought skills and expertise that none of us here at Bitch had—everything from where to place the lending library, to what kind of shelves we should build, to what categories we should have and where they should go, to how we should organize them in an online catalogue ... We were pretty lost until they arrived! ... It's brought new meaning to the work we do because we'll finally have a way of connecting

more directly with the community here in Portland, on top of connecting with an amazing group. (as cited in Morrone & Friedman, 2009, p. 392)

More information about the Bitch Community Lending Library is at [bitchmagazine.org/library](http://bitchmagazine.org/library).

In November 2012, the Boston collective organized a Critical Library Symposium, “Practical Choices for Powerful Impacts: Realizing the Activist Potential of Librarians,” to address librarians’ roles in “mirroring and perpetuating systems of oppression found throughout the rest of society” (Radical Reference, 2012). This examination of how librarians who identify as activists in whatever form interact with patrons and students, make collection choices, maintain archives, and organize events and programs was well-attended and well-received. One of the organizers, Heather McCann, said:

[T]he discussion with the participants [was] so rich. The breakout groups were frank conversations where people brought up issues in their own organizations that were sometimes troubling, sometimes heartening and always thought-provoking. When we regrouped to report back, people were excited to continue the conversation. I don't think that I've seen a group that large where so many people were interested in contributing (even given that librarians are a chatty bunch). (H. McCann, personal communication, March 20, 2013)

A number of presentations and workshops have been done by Radical Reference members on archives and alternative library materials. In 2010, for example, Alan Ginsberg, Matt Metzgar, and Deborah Edel presented at “Documenting Struggle Redux: Radical New York City Archives,” which examined how community history is kept alive through archives, documentation, and community support. Highlighting the Lower East Side Squatter-Homesteader Archive and the Lesbian Herstory Archives, this talk made these important materials visible and allowed people to learn more deeply about how these collections are being handled, arranged, and made accessible.

RR members have also presented at conferences across the United States and Canada, including the NYC Grassroots Media Conference; the Allied Media Conference; the Mid-Atlantic Radical Bookfair and the NYC Anarchist Bookfair; the Women, Action, & the Media Conference; the National Conference on Organized Resistance; the US Social Forum; and NYC's Brecht Forum on issues regarding open source software, fact checking for journalists and activists, community needs assessments in activist work, alternative materials in libraries, and alternative libraries.

## **Conclusion and Future of RR**

As I was finishing this chapter, RR received an email from a librarian with the subject line “are you still a group?” which is a perfect question at this time. Many of the organization's cofounders have not been actively involved for years; new volunteers and moderators have stepped in to care for the site, but the balance—between being able to answer questions, host events, flyer at protests, and create learning guides—seems always to be precarious. The original coauthor of this article dropped out due to time constraints, a recurring theme with our volunteers. We consistently sign up new librarians, and local collectives such as the Boston one do inspiring work in their community. We believe that we have value in the field of alternative library models but fear for the future of Radical Reference in its present state. How do we fit into the future of libraries and library work as we move forward?

## **References**

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