

Review of 'Informed agitation: library and information skills in social justice movements and beyond'

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ABSTRACT: Review of Morrone, Melissa, ed. *Informed agitation: library and information skills in social justice movements and beyond*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2014.

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One of the most striking things when first engaging with *Informed agitation: library and information skills in social justice movements and beyond* is the breadth of coverage, applications and actions covered across the collection of 20 chapters. The book, edited by Melissa Morrone, a Brooklyn-based public librarian and activist, aims to cover the breadth of current practitioners of critical and activist librarians from “movement archives to zine collections, international solidarity to public library programming, oral histories to email lists, prisons to protests —and beyond —this book is a look into the projects and pursuits of activist librarianship in the early 21st century.”

Much of the content of the collection may have otherwise featured in radical pamphlets, zines, blogs and other discursive sites away from LIS literature, making it particularly important from a pedagogical viewpoint; the collation and presentation as an explicitly LIS-oriented collection allows for accessibility and discoverability across the profession at large. Due to the breadth of the collection, this review will make comments on a very small sample of the chapters and then move on to a general review of the strengths and weaknesses of the book as a whole.

Vani Natarajan and Hannah Mermelstein’s chapter on [*Knowledge, Access, and Resistance: A Conversation on Librarians and Archivists to Palestine*](#) initially attracted my attention as ‘Librarians and Archivists with Palestine’ is a group I have been personally supporting since first becoming aware of their work earlier in 2014. This chapter is largely a transcription of a conversation between Natarajan and Mermelstein, two of the American contingent of international librarians from schools, university and public libraries, that also included representatives from Sweden, Trinidad & Tobago and the UK/Palestine. The conversation introduces some ideas such as the issues and tensions of language in international and globalised politics, including in the semantic field of “democracy”, and the role of libraries and archives have played in creating ideological spaces for the creation and maintenance of the status quo through a ““civilising” mission” (Natarajan & Mermelstein, 2013: 253).

This opened the space for an explicit discussion of the political potential that libraries have offered in Palestine following the First Intifada in the 1980s. This is said to have occurred as the “library by default becomes a space of resistance” where it is illegal for people to teach in their private residences. Although a certain romance of such radicalism might be present within the discourse, the conversational nature of the contribution affords the text a sympathetic space, which is frankly welcome in literature which *can* be stifled by formality and convention, implicitly negating certain subjectivities and promoting quasi-positivist, empiricist approaches. Indeed, this is something that the wider collection benefits from, although this may inhibit some of the ‘rigour’ that readers may expect from a scholarly text, as discussed below.

Although a contribution directly from the librarians and archivists of Palestine would be preferable to understand more directly their praxis, remit, and operations, there is a demonstrable awareness throughout of the privileges and cultural distance that Natarajan and Mermelstein have as American citizens from Palestinian life, and they express their conscious desire to avoid “witnessing as a form of activism” (Natarajan & Mermelstein, 2013: 249). A notable example is the discussion of the Library of Congress classification system. There are well known issues with the system in terms of its reflection of a patriarchal and imperialist, hierarchical society. However, the representation of a librarian at Birzeit and their struggle to work within a standardised system that imposes terminology that would not otherwise be culturally appropriate highlighted practical issues that emerge through the reproduction of Western, imperialist ideologies. Such reflexions and discussions explicitly avoid *othering* Palestinian librarians and proactively manage accusations of a colonialist narratives.

The UK is represented in the collection courtesy of Dan Grace who explicates his engagement as a public librarian with a diverse social reading group in Sheffield. This European contribution is of note not only as a break from the otherwise dominant US voices within the collection, but because it offers some very practical opportunities to be developed for other librarians.

[*Reading for a Better Future: Books For A Better Future \(BFABF\) and Sustainability Literacy in a UK Public Library*](#) is a concise chapter, providing a depth of primary evidence and secondary references, which frames the wider social and political context of the project. Grace’s project was designed as an active approach towards promoting sustainability literacy, and there is a detailed theoretical and practical narration of aims, purposes and a very important reflexive section which would be well worth consulting prior to any attempts to provide or develop a similar service.

As “the library worker involved with the program must attempt to raise the profile of the group within the local authority and encourage the group towards actions that will positively impact local resilience” (Grace, 2013: 51). Again, this emphasises the significant scale of undertaking such projects as they interlink with a wide range of social and governmental groups that each require variant approaches if any substantive, sustainable community impact is to be made.

There are too many chapters of personal interest to note, but it would seem remiss of me not to mention Freedman & Kauffman’s [*Cutter & Paste: a DIY Guide for Catalogers Who Don't Know About Zines and Zine Librarians Who Don't Know About Cataloging*](#), Hoyer & MacDonald’s *threeSOURCE: Reimagining How We Collect and Share Information about Social Issues*, and Moran’s *To spread the revolution: anarchist archives and libraries*, all of

which resonated with my own critical practice and shed a welcome light on praxes that are underrepresented in the LIS literature.

The volume and diversity of contributions does open a risk that the plurality of styles may produce some incoherence, but the editing process has functioned very well in and successfully minimises this. That said, such collections are unlikely to be read from cover-to-cover. It seems more suited to ‘dipping’ in to pertinent areas for examples of how projects were set up, or to understand how interventions and social processes can have an effect on user communities and those peripherally engaged.

It is along these lines that readers may get the most from this text, as an introduction to aspects at the intersection of radical, social practices and LIS practices. However, for the vast range of areas covered there may have been space for some deeper critical depth. This is not to diminish the collection’s excellent work as an accessible entry point to social activism in library and information practice, but there is a space for further analyses to interrogate the actions described. The volume provides a welcome foundation to continue to build from for LIS scholarship in these areas.

As briefly mentioned above, there is preponderance of Western, particularly American voices throughout the book. Such geopolitical limitations can act as a barrier to wider social progress. However, given the context of radical praxis for LIS and social justice, there is authorial awareness that seeks to limit an imperialist narrative that could otherwise emanate. However, there is a broad diversity of content covered, although the libraries and information sources discussed are largely in the public sphere. There is little direct coverage of the proportionately significant vocational realm of, for example, academic librarianship and radical praxis. Of course, the actions and projects discussed could be co-opted, appropriated by such variant realms, but each domain has discrete variables, and consideration would be required. As such, narratives of existing attempts may have been of benefit, particularly in the context of radical shifts across higher education which is facing increased pressure to partner with the private sector and receive less public funding. The [web presence of the book](#) offers a space for the volume to develop, which is another novel aspect of the book with further resources offered, although it lacks the dialogical structure that contemporary websites can provide. Here, some of the chapters are freely accessible as a partial digital archive of the book as Library Juice Press do not currently function as an open access publisher, primarily relying on the printed media to circulate the ideas. This may be a philosophical weakness to the dissemination of radical social justice work in a contemporary, globalised context, although some of the authors have made their work accessible on various platforms, as linked to throughout this review.

To summarise, *Informed agitation: library and information skills in social justice movements and beyond* is a very welcome, accessible, and somewhat overdue collection, offering as it does library and information workers' diverse expressions of how their praxis aligns with the wider context of power, politics, and social justice. It successfully introduces the struggle "against the idea that neutrality covers all aspects of our work evenly [and with this also,] wrestling with the ideals, not always realized, of autonomy from institutional control- a key theme in grassroots activism of all kinds" (Morrone, 2013: 6). This success should not be understated when considering how much LIS necessitates an increased presence of contemporary critical theory and radical praxis to challenge the neoliberal threat to public spaces and organisation.