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Poster: Exploring the Information Context at the Pride Library at the University of Western Ontario

Abstract: This poster examines the unique information context fostered at the Pride Library at the University of Western Ontario, focusing on patrons and patron activities. From January to April 2011, the researcher conducted ethnographic research at the Pride Library including: participant observation, unobtrusive observation, semi-structured interviews and photography.

Résumé: Cette affiche examine le contexte d'information unique qu'offre la bibliothèque Pride à l'University of Western Ontario, en se concentrant sur les usagers et leurs activités. De janvier à avril 2011, les chercheurs ont mené une étude ethnographique à la bibliothèque, comprenant l'observation des usagers, l'observation non intrusive, des entrevues semi structurées et des photographies.

1. Introduction

Officially founded in 1997, the Pride Library is a pioneering Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) Canadian information-based organization. Although located within D.B. Weldon Library at the University of Western Ontario, the Pride Library operates autonomously as a grassroots, volunteer-run organization. The Pride Library case study, therefore, reflects a tradition within LGBTQ communities towards preserving and disseminating information otherwise marginalized by larger society. Examining the Pride Library provides insight into how localized grassroots information organizations respond to LGBTQ information needs.

In exploring the information activities at the Pride Library, my project addresses the following research questions:

1. Who uses the Pride Library and to what ends?
2. How do patrons perceive the Pride Library?

Or, more specifically:

3. Is the Pride Library valued for the concrete LGBTQ information resources provided or more abstractly as an information-rich site for networking and more social opportunities – or both?

2. Background and Context

Within LIS literature on LGBTQ issues, there are two distinct areas of inquiry: how professional and institutional library practice relates to LGBTQ information needs (Greenblatt and Gough, 1990; Carmichael Junior, 1998; Martin and Murdock, 2007; Greenblatt, 2010) and the information seeking needs and activities of LGBTQ individuals and communities (Creelman and

Harris, 1989; Whitt, 1993; Joyce and Schrader, 1997; Taylor, 2003; Rothbauer, 2004a; Rothbauer, 2004b). Despite the continuing interest in LGBTQ issues within LIS, grassroots information organizations created by the LGBTQ community have yet to be explored in depth. These organizations warrant attention because, as Rothbauer (2007) argues, conventional information organizations fail to create meaningful spaces for LGBTQ individuals and communities.

Building on Rothbauer (2007), this study directly engages with an LGBTQ information-based environment to understand what makes the site unique and meaningful for the LGBTQ community. A major theoretical underpinning of this work is the movement towards understanding “library as place,” as articulated by Buschman and Leckie (2007). The concept of “information grounds,” (Prigoda & McKenzie, 2007) is also useful for articulating the informal interplays between people, place and information outside of information-sharing mandated events such as reference interviews, study groups or classroom instruction.

This study is also informed by an exploratory study of the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) that I conducted between June and August 2010 (Cooper, In Press). The Pride Library study, therefore, follows Stebbins (2006) concept of the “concatenated research approach,” where a series of field studies are linked together toward creating grounded theory. Over the course of my research at the LHA, I observed that the archives were not only valued by users for the information they housed, but also for providing a welcoming, social environment that fosters information exchanges of a less material nature.

3. Approach

Library ethnographies are an emerging methodological approach for investigating the range of activities that take place within library settings. (Foster and Gibbons, 2007; Asher, Duke and Green, 2010). Reflecting the Pride Library’s location within a university and the particular rhythms of university life, I conducted the study over the course of an academic semester. In order to participate as fully in the Pride Library environment as possible, I visited the Pride Library on a weekly basis from January 13, 2011 to April 8, 2011. In total, I spent nineteen individual days and approximately one hundred and twenty-five to one hundred and fifty hours in the field.

Data collection and analysis relied primarily on the ethnographic record produced via my observation-based field notes, semi-structured interviews and photographs of the site. The data analysis process drew from Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) and Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) “grounded” theoretical approach, which prescribes closely reading data samples towards analysis, or, from the “ground” up. Due to the size of the research project, I relied exclusively on manual analysis as opposed to employing qualitative data analysis software (i.e. NVivo).

4. Findings and Implications

The Pride Library is a significant symbolic LGBTQ space. Contrasting the Pride Library with other LGBTQ venues like bars and social groups, my informants characterized the library as a less intimidating environment for exploring LGBTQ identity. For example, for many of my

informants, physically stepping into the Pride Library represented a major gesture towards “coming out.” Similarly, once inside, my informants reported that the Pride Library’s resources provided a useful outlet for exploring their LGBTQ interests before they build the confidence to discuss these interests with others in person. Within this highly social environment, I also observed that informal conversation represents a major site for LGBTQ information exchange. The information exchanged not only enabled patrons to explore their personal identity, but also share information about LGBTQ resources and the LGBTQ community in general.

In addition to articulating the Pride Library’s unique context, these findings are useful for understanding and creating LGBTQ information spaces and community-based information spaces more broadly. This study also provides insight into partnerships between grassroots and institutionalized information organizations and demonstrates the value in fostering space for specific communities within larger generalized library settings. Methodologically, this study also demonstrates ethnography’s viability within information environments.

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