The information and knowledge landscapes of mutual aid: how librarians can use participatory action research to support social movements in community development

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The Information and Knowledge Landscapes of Mutual Aid: How Librarians Can Use PAR to Support Social Movements in Community Development

In March 2020, as COVID-19 began to rock the foundations of human existence, my library colleagues and I were finishing a mass digitization campaign of all the not-yet-digital course materials assigned to students at our university. With the reality of quarantine and remote education looming, we realized the importance of ensuring that students could complete their coursework in a fully online environment. Apart from a few hiccups due to copyright restrictions and human error, we succeeded.

As academic librarians operating in a global pandemic, my team understood our role in supporting students' informational needs. But as a longtime U.S.-based activist who came to the field of library and information science (LIS) with the goal of supporting the information and knowledge landscapes of leftist social movements, I was much more confused. How to meet the immediate, material needs of ordinary people – especially those least able to leave their homes because of coronavirus? How to do that while also exerting pressure against the decades of neoliberal austerity measures, attacks on social services, and dismantling of workplace protections that disproportionately exacerbated the pandemic's effects on those most marginalized? How to combat the virus-related and public health misinformation spewing forth from the Trump Administration, other authoritarian governments, and right-wing movements? And how, if at all, to offer my personal and professional expertise to these efforts – was it even relevant in this moment, and could I do it in a non-patronizing way?

With these questions swirling, I – like tens of thousands of others around the world – joined my neighborhood's newly formed and virtually organized mutual aid group. The folks next door, turns out, were trying to answer many of the same questions through trial and error. They were learning from similar groups cropping up worldwide, and digging up the long history of mutual aid grounded in North American Black, LGBTQ, and anarchist communities. As I played my small part by bike-delivering groceries and personal protective equipment (PPE), organizing virtual game nights with neighbors, and offering minor technical assistance on data collection and digital cartography, I started to realize just how much information management was necessary to coordinate the complex logistics of mutual aid. Simultaneously and rather uncomfortably, I also began to understand how much my "non-expert" neighbors and their counterparts worldwide were teaching me about grassroots, justice-focused information management and knowledge production in a sociopolitical moment of acute crisis[1], and about the role librarians could play in supporting leftist social movements beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

I eventually came to see these lessons through the lens of participatory action research (PAR), realizing that the epistemic frameworks of the social movements I had been involved with since 2011 were just as useful, if not more so, than my master's degree in LIS – at least in terms of determining how best to leverage my professional expertise to support those movements.

This chapter is an effort to synthesize these lessons and make practical recommendations to other librarians and knowledge professionals. Mutual aid - including and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic - is a case study in how social movements can facilitate transformative community development through grassroots knowledge production, reliant on information

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[1] Unless explicitly noted, when I refer to "crisis," I mean acute and temporally bounded instances of crisis (such as aftermaths of environmental disasters), as well as chronic modes of social crisis (such as structural racism).

management. Their approach aligns with participatory action research (PAR), which can provide a framework for librarians and other knowledge professionals to support the social movements in their communities by leveraging relevant expertise in solidarity-minded ways.

Theoretical foundations

Social movements

A social movement is a group of people publicly expressing unified goals for social change against dominant powers, and doing so over a sustained period of time (Stoecker, 2020). Through this work, social movements produce knowledge that challenges status quo understandings of societal phenomena. Social movements are often able to do so thanks to participation and leadership from people who have directly experienced oppression and exploitation. For example, in the U.S. social movements have recently been at the forefront of shifting dominant frameworks about how and for whom the police function (Black Lives Matter), the conditions necessary for the rise of fascism (Antifa), the inequities intrinsic to capitalism (Occupy), the urgent threat of climate change and its disproportionate effects on marginalized peoples (#NoDAPL, Sunrise, Extinction Rebellion), and the imperialist agenda at the heart of the national security apparatus (immigrant rights and anti-war movements). Historically, U.S. social movements have played critical roles in dismantling normative assumptions about who deserved voter enfranchisement (Civil Rights and Women's Suffrage movements), economic independence (second-wave feminist movement), autonomy over one's own body (reproductive rights movement), and freedom from "anti-Communist" intervention (movement against the Vietnam War).

Chesters (2012) popularized the theory of social movements as knowledge producers. He argued that advanced industrial democracies have assimilated social movements into normative ontologies of political participation, thus rendering them "commodifiable objects" for the academic to create knowledge *about* rather than *with*. A number of Chesters' contemporaries have heeded his call, identifying social movements as knowledge co-creators in their collaborative, independent research processes (Halvorsen, 2015), "uniquely self-reflexive nature" (Lewis, 2012), internal ability for critique and analysis (Dawson & Sinwell, 2012; Arribas Lozano, 2018), critical application of non-dominant theories of social change (Atton, 2003), and visionary ideas and goals of societal transformation (Castells, 2004).

Community Development (CD)

Through their work as grassroots knowledge producers, social movements can function as critical nodes of CD. For marginalized peoples, CD tends to happen through the formation of "counterpublics" – sociopolitical spaces that challenge Habermas' "bourgeois conception of the public sphere" by explicitly centering the needs of marginalized peoples. Social movements can create counterpublics by legitimizing, mobilizing, and sustaining marginalized communities in disrupting and eventually shifting the status quo (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). This liberatory view aligns with McCrea et al's (2017) definition of CD as a process of "provid[ing] legitimacy for educational engagement that seeks to make power visible and to consider the tactics by which it can be reclaimed, negotiated, or resisted." Here, social movements' knowledge-production capacities are crucial to CD, especially given CD's "ambivalent story" wherein governments have harnessed CD rhetoric to respond to structural crises in superficial and disempowering ways. In contrast, social movements – by targeting the structural underpinnings of oppression in order to eliminate their material and ideological bases – provide the non-dominant forms of knowledge necessary to guide CD towards its transformative potential.

Library and Information Science (LIS)

While social movements are well-positioned to lead transformative CD work, they don't have unlimited capacity to do so. Though their power hierarchies are often horizontally organized, social movements' activities are usually vertically integrated. Social movements are frequently responsible for simultaneously fulfilling the material and emotional needs of their communities, coordinating protest and direct action, applying pressure to elected officials, and recruiting and integrating new activists. Community members can alleviate the pressures on social movements by offering existing relevant expertise.

One area of expertise relevant to social movements' knowledge production processes is information management. As "fundamentally communicative" formations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2015), social movements locate, collect, curate, disseminate, and preserve information to advance their causes. Social movements are oftentimes the only ones managing certain information in explicitly political and transformative ways, and thus cannot always depend on other more traditional informational entities. Especially with the ubiquity of Internet-based information and communications technology (ICT) including social media, information management is crucial in facilitating the interpersonal and communal connections necessary to social movement organizing.

Information management and ICT-based knowledge production can facilitate CD by alleviating feelings of social isolation in the wake of disaster (Glasgow et al, 2016), maintaining informal social networks ready to mobilize in moments of crisis (Loudon, 2010), building individual and communal resiliency (Semaan, 2019), and creating a sense of stability (Semaan & Mark, 2011). Marginalized communities have also wielded ICT to strengthen diasporic bonds (Everett, 2002; Riedel, 2019), facilitate transnational solidarity (Everett, 2002), and collaboratively re-conceptualize their own identities (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

In geographically defined communities, librarians serve as people-centered experts on information management. Librarians have expertise in many areas relevant to social movement activity, including protecting privacy, evaluating reputable sources, managing and preserving

organizational records, democratically communicating information across demographics, working with data, conducting qualitative and quantitative research, evaluating projects based on community outcomes, and leveraging ICT (ALA Council, 2009). Critically, librarians aim to make their expertise as accessible as possible throughout their communities, prioritizing collective benefit over profit. This goal is unique within the neoliberal public sphere, and necessary for the survival of society's most socioeconomically precarious (Drabinski, 2006). Based on these qualities, U.S. librarians have largely earned the trust of their communities (Horrigan, 2016). Librarians are thus uniquely positioned to support social movements in their knowledge production processes.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

As a methodology of communal and grassroots knowledge production, PAR provides an ethically and politically vibrant framework for librarians and other knowledge professionals to pursue co-creative work with social movements. PAR recognizes that a small group of people – namely, white Western capitalists and the academics working at their behest – are responsible for the majority of sociopolitically legitimized knowledge, which upholds their monopoly on power. This recognition traces back to Marxist philosophy, which encourages the "proletariat" to "create their own history" instead of passively inheriting the "science of the bourgeoisie" (Rahman, 2008). Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda has observed the potential for PAR practitioners to impose their own notions of what this creation looks like on marginalized communities (Rahman, 2008), which has encouraged PAR practitioners to critically assess how to co-create knowledge with non-academic collective actors in useful and sustainable ways. To this end, Stoecker (2014) has highlighted the popular education movement advanced primarily by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and U.S. labor and civil rights activist Myles Horton. Popular education as a method gathers members of a marginalized community and facilitates dialogue between these community members on their common experiences. Through this process, community members can identify the systemic roots of their experiences and develop collective strategies for addressing them (Stoecker, 2014) - directly mirroring how social movements function.

Halvorsen (2015) and Lewis (2012) take PAR a step further, advocating a practice of "militant research" that aims to "pus[h] the movement forward" through "committed and intense process[es] of internal reflection from within particular struggle(s)" (Halvorsen, 2015). To do so effectively and ethically, Halvorsen (2015) argues that militant researchers must "tak[e] seriously the ontologies and epistemologies of social movements themselves" by defining their positionality "from within a movement" rather than from their work in academia. In other words, militant researchers must understand themselves first as having a vested interest in the movement's goals in order to genuinely contribute to its knowledge production processes. This movement-first positionality applies to librarians and other knowledge professionals who wish to support the social movements in their communities.

Mutual aid during and beyond COVID-19

Within weeks of COVID-19's initial global spread, a vast network of grassroots groups coalesced under the banner of "mutual aid" thanks to rapid coordination by longtime and first-time community organizers (Town Hall Project, 2021). In a time of necessary physical

isolation, these virtually organized groups were paying close attention to the needs of the most medically and socioeconomically vulnerable members of their hyperlocal communities. They were recognizing the difficulty that elderly and immunocompromised people would have obtaining basic supplies, and developing practical methods of confronting the virus' disproportionate impacts on poor people and people of color (Science for the People, 2020). On a structural level, these groups were filling the enormous gap in state-run social services and people-centered policy that had long left millions of people in chronic crisis due to lack of adequate healthcare, income, housing, and socioeconomic mobility.

Mutual aid groups soon began coordinating volunteers to deliver groceries, medication, and other essentials to homebound community members (Adler-Bell, 2020); making face masks and organizing their distribution to hospitals and to those without means of procuring their own; providing free lunches for food-insecure kids facing school closures and for people experiencing houselessness (Goodman et al, 2020); pressuring local lawmakers to enact immediate moratoriums on rent collections and evictions (Rent Strike, 2020); and raising bail funds for people in prison, where some of the most severe COVID-19 outbreaks were taking place (Goodman et al, 2020). A few months later, as police officers and white vigilantes carried out a spate of racist murders against Black people including Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, many mutual aid groups expanded their activities to draw attention to the U.S.' centuries-long legacy of white supremacist violence; support Black Lives Matter protestors with water, food, and first aid; and lobby municipal governments to defund their police departments.

A brief history of mutual aid in the U.S.: 1787-2021

Though "mutual aid" was a term of relative obscurity in North America until the pandemic began (Solnit, 2020), it has existed in name for over a century and recorded practice for over 200 years. Russian anarchist Pëtr Kropotkin first coined the phrase in his 1902 book, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, describing mutual aid as the ideal state of human affairs wherein society is organized through collective means. He argued that the state sees mutual aid as a threat to its dominance, and sows individualism in ideology and material reality. Within Kropotkin's framework, mutual aid is a necessary strategy of working-class survival and ultimate liberation from state-based society.

Kropotkin was describing a phenomenon that Black communities in the eastern U.S. had been carrying out since at least 1787, when two Philadelphia ministers founded the Free African Society that would soon take primary responsibility in caring for the sick, orphaned, and dead during a yellow fever epidemic (Aberg-Riger, 2020). In the early 1800s, as more Black people self-emancipated and migrated north, mutual aid societies proliferated to challenge slave-catchers, offer legal defense, and provide for the basic needs of formerly enslaved peoples (National Humanities Center, 2007). These efforts continued into the late 19th century, when 15 percent of Black men and 52 percent of Black women in New York City belonged to a mutual aid society (Aberg-Riger, 2020). At the turn of the century, Chinese, Jewish, and Mexican immigrants formed similar groups to care for their own amidst rampant racism (Aberg-Riger, 2020). Two decades later during the Spanish Flu, women-led mutual aid groups recruited volunteer nurses and ran soup kitchens for patients (Stoecker, 2020). Mutual aid activities declined after the Great Depression, but returned in full force by the late 1960s when the Black Panther Party launched a free breakfast program in Oakland that quickly grew to serve over 50,000 children across the country. The Panthers also provided armed community self-defense

from racist police, and liberatory education on the history of U.S. white supremacy. This organizing prompted the FBI under Herbert Hoover to infiltrate the Panthers in a mass undercover campaign known as COINTELPRO (Aberg-Riger, 2020; Pien, 2010). Despite state efforts, marginalized communities throughout the U.S. continued to pursue mutual aid activities for decades to come. In the early 1970s, the Puerto Rican Young Lords in New York City won municipal services for their previously neglected neighborhood. In the 1980s and 90s, the Chicken Soup Brigade in Seattle supported people living with AIDS (PWA) in their daily tasks (Aberg-Riger, 2020). In 2005, Mutual Aid Disaster Relief covered the basic needs of New Orleans residents after Hurricane Katrina while the federal government demonized the city's predominantly Black population (MADR, 2020). And in 2012, Occupy Sandy built on the anti-capitalist Occupy Wall Street movement to provide politically vocal relief for those affected by Hurricane Sandy (Soden, 2020a).

Mutual aid in the U.S. has sometimes manifested as a key strategy within a broader social movement, and other times as a social movement itself. Given its centrality to pandemic response among marginalized communities, especially as much other movement activity slowed due to physical distancing measures, I consider COVID-19 mutual aid to be a social movement itself.

As did their predecessors, COVID-19 mutual aid groups represent a wide range of political analyses. Some are explicitly anti-state, others view their work as a temporary necessity until a more responsible state structure is built, some are intentionally apolitical, and still others are part of the state itself (Stoecker, 2020). But two principles tend to dominate among them. First, they recognize that ordinary people experience precarity not because of personal failure, but because of systemic processes that foster poverty and inequity. Summed up by the slogan "solidarity not charity" (Big Door Brigade), mutual aid groups prioritize those most affected by crisis by trusting them as experts in their own needs. This model contrasts that of state agencies and nonprofit organizations, whose interests may not align with the communities they purport to serve (Goodman et al, 2020). It also mirrors PAR's methodologies for co-created knowledge.

Second, mutual aid groups enact "prefigurative politics," meaning they try to build models for a liberatory society within existing structures - often through communal modes of living and service. Many groups view prefigurative politics as a necessary step toward societal transformation because it can meet marginalized peoples' basic needs and facilitate their disruptive efforts, while others see it as itself a disruptive effort. PAR is built on a recognition of the short- and long-term transformative potential of prefigurative efforts.

Community development through the information and knowledge landscapes of mutual aid

Mutual aid throughout history has involved information management, done by and for communities who wouldn't otherwise have access to its processes or potentials. COVID-19 mutual aid groups are no exception, given the necessity of correcting the misleading and often dangerous virus-related information spouted by right-wing governments and their supporters worldwide. A collective of Chinese anti-statist organizers has even called COVID-19 mutual aid groups "crucial nodes for the distribution of information and goods" (COVID-19 Mutual Aid Seattle & PARISOL, 2020). Globally, these groups have compiled spreadsheets and maps on social service and PPE availability, testing locations, protest locations and safety tactics, mental health resources, and beyond. They've curated digital handbooks for fellow organizers on launching websites, facilitating meetings, and exerting pressure on elected officials (MAAMA,

2020a & 2020b; MAMAS, 2020). They've collected and analyzed data that states and corporations have refused to release (Adler-Bell, 2020). They've developed virtual communication spaces via Facebook, Zoom, WhatsApp, and Slack for their neighbors and fellow organizers to coordinate aid and alleviate loneliness. Some of them have explicitly described their work under the banner of LIS, such as the Coronavirus Tech Handbook maintained by a team of volunteer librarians (Newspeak House, 2020) and Mutual Aid Arlington in Massachusetts which provides virtual reference through their website (2020b).

Grassroots information management like that practiced by COVID-19 mutual aid groups is critical in mediating crisis outcomes. Indeed, during COVID-19 some researchers have identified "any global health crises [as] also *information* crises that require serious attention" (Xie et al, 2020, emphasis in original). The field of crisis informatics – which studies the ways ICT shapes societal relationships to various types of disaster (Soden, 2020a) – emphasizes the importance of reliable, up-to-date information in shaping crisis response. Traditional media sources, however, are often unable to provide real-time updates to constantly changing situations due to limited access to crisis zones and lack of familiarity with local conditions (Chernobrov, 2018). Additionally, policymakers can hoard information and communicate it publicly in ways that deny the gravity or nuance of a situation, reducing the social trust necessary for successful crisis response (Clarke & Chess, 2008). At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, many health experts inaccurately claimed that masks were ineffective. Though they probably intended to preserve masks for healthcare workers, their messages likely stoked virus denialism (Tufecki, 2020). These shortcomings combined with the Internet's overloaded information landscape can lead to rumors and conspiracy theories that tend to undermine public health efforts (Kou et al, 2017). This phenomenon has appeared during COVID-19 with the pervasive spread of lies about the origin of the virus, its severity, and its treatment.

To prevent the potential consequences described above, some crisis informatics researchers have suggested the "first communicator" as an informational first responder (Chernobrov, 2018; Palen et al, 2020; Reuter et al, 2013). As members of communities directly affected by crises, first communicators can augment formal emergency response with experiential knowledge by monitoring social media, verifying official information, creating and updating digital maps (Palen et al, 2020), collecting information on missing people (Kaufhold & Reuter, 2016), and producing journalistic content (Chernobrov, 2018). These contributions can drastically increase the likelihood that the public will make "informed decisions that protect their health" (Parmer et al, 2016). Radio announcer Genie Chance provided this kind of information-focused mutual aid in the immediate aftermath of the massive 1964 Alaska earthquake, when she broadcast an endless stream of messages from city employees and civilian volunteers to paint the most reliable picture available of who was safe, who was missing, and where aid was needed (Meigs, 2020). The widespread availability of ICT today has opened up new and more accessible volunteer opportunities (Chernobrov, 2018), with "risk communication for crises now commonly occurring in online spaces, especially social media" (Palen et al, 2020). The concept of first communicators shares a foundation with mutual aid by centering the experiential knowledge of ordinary people as experts on their own communities and needs, and facilitating that work through information management and ICT use.

Where crises introduce pain and hardship, they also introduce opportunity. COVID-19 mutual aid has taken advantage of the opportunities introduced during the pandemic to unify previously atomized individuals, recognize common experiences of systemic oppression, and form strategies to overcome the symptoms and foundation of those structures. While during

COVID-19 some leftists have expressed doubt that traditional movement organizations can absorb thousands of newly engaged activists (Adler-Bell, 2020), others have voiced their hopes that the networks of solidarity developed through COVID-19 mutual aid can be leveraged for long-term movement organizing (Tolentino, 2020). These hopes seem viable, considering that many COVID-19 mutual aid groups rose up out of the Black Lives Matter, prison abolition, anti-colonization, disability justice, and Occupy Wall Street movements (Goodman et al, 2020; Holder, 2020; Soden, 2020a). Following the worst of the COVID-19 crisis, it seems well within the realm of possibility that these movements could return to less circumscribed modes of organizing with an even greater number of participants.

An historical realization of a similar possibility is instructive. The information-focused mutual aid undertaken during the U.S. AIDS activist movement highlights the transformative CD potential of such efforts. McKinney (2018) details the Philadelphia-based organization Critical Path, spearheaded by Kiyoshi Kuromiya, a Japanese-American civil rights and anti-war activist and co-founder of the Gay Liberation Front. In the 1980s, Critical Path produced a print newsletter for PWA based on the latest health research, which at that time was shared through novel ICT to which many PWA didn't have access. Critical Path augmented this research with firsthand "information on support groups, organizational schedules, experimental AIDS medications and protocols, alternative therapies, […] and direct services available to PWA" - which "was otherwise unavailable through mainstream media and public-health agencies." By distilling this information in a physical newsletter distributed to the most vulnerable PWA - including intravenous drug users, those in prison, and those experiencing houselessness - Critical Path exponentially increased the likelihood that PWA would access treatment and community. Critical Path continued its work throughout the 1990s, becoming a free Internet Service Provider for PWA and AIDS Service Organizations. Critical Path's practices of community-focused information management were essential to ACT UP, whose AIDS activism expanded the U.S. Center for Disease Control's definition of the virus, broadened and accelerated the National Institutes of Health's AIDS research, and destigmatized the virus and queer identity. Through their savvy wielding of ICT grounded in firsthand knowledge of the virus and its impacts, AIDS activists "improve[d] PWA's lives and ultimately [found] a cure by bridging community knowledge with medical research." Mutual aid during the AIDS crisis thus played a huge role in sustaining queer communities, building strategies, and legitimizing epistemologies that would continue to transform queer folks' lives in the U.S. for decades to come.

PAR and librarians

Librarians are information experts, trusted community anchors, and service providers for socioeconomically precarious community members. They are therefore well-positioned to support mutual aid's and other social movements' information management and knowledge production, in service of transformative CD. Jessamyn West (2020) has even described U.S. librarians as long-standing providers of mutual aid. We can look to recent examples during COVID-19 like the Columbia University librarian who leveraged her 3D printing expertise to produce a face shield design, a printing guide, and hundreds of prototypes in collaboration with healthcare providers around New York City (Morrow, 2020); and the University of Colorado research working group pursuing qualitative and quantitative data analysis in collaboration with U.S. mutual aid groups (Soden, 2020a).

Historically, though, librarians' own mutual aid efforts are exemplified perhaps most notably in Radical Reference (RR). RR was a nonhierarchical group of hundreds of volunteer

library workers who throughout the early 2000s "support[ed] activist communities, progressive organizations, and independent journalists by providing professional research support, education and access to information" (Brant & Yanek, 2009). RR emerged from the recognition that "most adults do not have the affiliations with colleges and universities that allow them access to the rich print and electronic collections of academic libraries," leaving social movements particularly hindered (Morrone & Friedman, 2009). RR would deploy "street librarians" equipped with "ready reference kits" to protests and demonstrations, offering reliable information to activists where they most needed it. RR also provided timely, multilingual online reference to activists worldwide on topics ranging from mass incarceration in the U.S. to anarchism in Czechia (Friedman & Morrone, 2008). RR's educational outreach included presentations on archival processes for movement documentation (Edel et al, 2010; Cuellar et al, 2011); strategies for getting radical and independent media sources into library collections (Freedman & Ross, 2009); and research methodologies (Freedman & Thelen, 2008). RR volunteers also participated in social movements, recognizing themselves as "part of the activist communities they serve" (Friedman & Morrone, 2008). Though in late 2017 RR announced a hiatus due to their increasingly limited capacities, RR's mutual aid efforts sustained leftist social movements by collecting and disseminating radically minded information based on the needs and feedback of activist communities.

While there is a robust history of radical librarianship in line with RR's work,[2] two dominant frameworks of LIS in the U.S. prevent librarians from effectively supporting the mutual aid group and other social movements in our communities in widespread ways. The first is an implicit paternalism that pervades the historical discourse of library outreach, framing librarians as bestowers of services upon "those in need" rather than as fellow community members with similar liberatory interests. This paternalism directly opposes the trust that mutual aid and PAR vest in the expertise of community members, including mutual aid and social movement participants. It dates back to the late-17th and early-18th centuries, when the Anglo-Saxon Protestant colonizers who founded U.S. librarianship "viewed librarians like missionaries" (Brady & Abbott, 2015) who could promote "good" books in order to cultivate "moral character" among the indigenous people and immigrants in their midst (Wiegand, 1989). Similarly patronizing attitudes continued through the 1970s, when public libraries used federal grant money from the Library Services and Construction Act to initiate outreach projects for the "disadvantaged" without the direct input of the marginalized communities they purported to serve – some librarians at the time even saw "citizen participation [as] a radical incursion" (Owens, 1987). Today, library discourse tends to prioritize outreach as a means of justifying to patrons why libraries are relevant, saying little about community impact. For example, public library leaders interviewed by Scott (2011) made such assertions as "the challenge is how we inform the public how we are meeting the challenge of serving the public," and "[d]oing what we can to build strong communities through libraries will enable libraries to thrive in the future." But acting as constructive participants in our communities should be an end in and of itself for librarians. If our communities do not see us as relevant to their information needs, then - in the spirit of mutual aid and PAR - we should focus on collaborating with fellow community members to fill service and structural gaps.

The second dominant LIS framework is political neutrality, codified in the profession's core ethical guidelines which assert the need to "distinguish between our personal convictions

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[2] See, for example, Joan C. Durrance's 1984 book *Armed for Action: Library Response to Citizen Information Needs* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers).

and professional duties" (ALA, 2008). This mandate is based on the notion that those who hold strong political views are "censorial" and therefore in defiance of LIS' guiding principle of intellectual freedom (Shockey, 2015). Of course, this assumption fails to acknowledge that the U.S. status quo – inclusive of neoliberalism, structural white supremacy, and imperial power – is itself a strong political view that has rendered necessary the direct care and visionary organization of mutual aid and other social movements. Gibson et al (2017) highlight the consequences of so-called political neutrality in their paper on the responsibilities libraries have to "engage with and support communities of color as they challenge systemic racism, engage in the political process, and exercise their right to free speech." The authors argue that librarians have "ignored the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement," and in doing so "actively elect[ed] not to support the information and service needs of a service population" and "allow[ed] inequality to persist as the status quo." The question of how to facilitate CD through information management and knowledge production is an inherently political one, as mutual aid groups and PAR practitioners have shown. In order to effectively answer it, librarians must define explicitly political professional principles and practices instead of hollow ones easily manipulated to serve oppressive power structures and their foot-soldiers.

Toward new models

PAR offers a framework for developing an explicitly political praxis of librarianship. At its core, PAR is a methodology of knowledge production undertaken by knowledge professionals in close collaboration with groups of marginalized actors who seek to enact structural sociopolitical change (Rahman, 2008). As fellow knowledge professionals, librarians can look to PAR's unabashedly political and community-led efforts for models of supporting the mutual aid groups and other social movements active in our communities.

Librarians Mehra & Braquet (2007) and Phillips et al (2019) have employed PAR in, respectively, campus LGBTQ solidarity efforts and union contract negotiations. Excitingly, their work only scratches the surface of the PAR-informed efforts librarians can pursue to support the CD work of mutual aid and other social movements. As a starting point, librarians can use Fals Borda's four informational techniques for building community power: pursuing collective research, recovering critical history, valuing and applying "folk" culture, and disseminating new knowledge (Rahman, 2008).

Based on these techniques, below are some of my own concrete suggestions for how librarians can support the social movements, including mutual aid, in their communities:

- Hire new staff or rework existing outreach-focused positions to serve as mutual aid- and/or movement-embedded librarians. Precedent for such positions already exists in academic libraries which employ subject-specific or disciplinary liaisons. Similar to these liaisons, movement-embedded librarians would need movement experience and theoretical expertise.
- Work with mutual aid groups and other movement actors to identify archival techniques most relevant to the cultural artifacts they're producing. Depending on librarian and organizer capacities, either offer workshops on those techniques to groups so they can continually document their own knowledge production practices, or take on those documentation processes as movement-embedded librarians. Create physical and digital

repositories to house and preserve this documentation, determining how to provision access based on movement needs and privacy concerns.

- Maintain a directory of local, non-institutional community organizations and activist groups, built through voluntary registrations and the experiential knowledge of mutual aid groups. Such a directory could provide a jumping-off point for community members not yet involved but interested in mutual aid and other social movement activity, as well as a resource for existing groups to find and pursue collaborative efforts with others working on similar issues.
- Maintain a directory of local PAR practitioners and community facilitators (Mackewn, 2008) whom mutual aid groups and other movement actors can contact for assistance with conducting independent research projects, running meetings, creating designated spaces for political assessment and internal reflection, and pursuing conflict-resolution and accountability strategies for organizers who have experienced harm in the course of their work. Establish library grant programs so these collaborations don't have to depend on either free labor or the constraints of academic research protocols. Establish program evaluation practices that allow groups to assess the efficacy of their work with these practitioners, and collaborate with practitioners to improve their work based on this feedback.
- Open up library makerspaces for mutual aid groups and other movement actors to make posters, signs, and banners in preparation for upcoming protests and demonstrations.
- Open up library meeting spaces for mutual aid groups and other movement actors to host meetings, lectures, and other in-person educational and organizational pursuits.
- Offer multimedia creation and editing hardware and software for checkout or use in library computer labs. Work with mutual aid groups and other movement actors to facilitate workshops on the use of these materials for independent media production.
- Offer consultations with mutual aid groups and other movement actors wishing to publish their own writing. These consultations could include information on independent publishing platform possibilities, strategies for establishing editorial boards, advice around copyright and open access, and networking with local publishers of newspapers and other independent media outlets.
- Negotiate with vendors or pursue grant funding to offer mutual aid groups and other social movements access to subscription-based journals and databases relevant to their work.
- Work with local digital and data privacy groups to advise mutual aid groups and other movement actors on Internet security best practices and social media protocol, both in general and surrounding specific protests or mobilizations.
- Establish an ongoing oral history project that invites past and present mutual aid groups and other movement actors to give spoken testimonies of their work and the lessons they've learned. Organize these testimonies and provision access to them based on movement needs and privacy concerns.
- Work with union representatives or colleagues to pass resolutions or policy documents affirming the rights of librarians to support and engage directly in mutual aid and other movement activity. Include in these documents explicit guarantees that the library will come to the defense of these librarians if they are targeted by the state, law enforcement, or counterprotest groups.

It's critical to unambiguously delineate the groups and movements librarians should actively exclude from their support work. There have long existed in the U.S. movements of white supremacists, fascists, and neo-Nazis. The Ku Klux Klan is a classic example, but we need not look as far back as their founding in the mid-1800s to find evidence of organized groups that romanticize and seek to harness the nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and indigenous genocide that has pervaded U.S. history. Embedded in these goals are the reactionary hopes of maintaining the "purity" of a narrowly defined white nation under "threat" by Black people, immigrants, Muslims, the LGBTQ community, and organized leftists (Miller & Graves, 2020). Since Donald Trump's election in 2016 the U.S. has seen a surge in far-right activity – including 125 rallies, marches, and protests nationwide – and the growth of extremist hate groups (Miller & Graves, 2020). Such groups include the Atomwaffen Division, a coalition of terror cells working toward civilizational collapse; The Base, a similar coalition seeking societal collapse specifically in order to establish a white ethnostate; Vanguard America, a neo-Nazi group whose membership includes James Alex Fields, Jr., the young man accused of murdering anti-racist protestor Heather Heyer with his car at the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottseville, Virginia on August 12, 2017; and Proud Boys, who helped to organize the aforementioned rally and spread white nationalist, anti-Muslim, and misogynistic rhetoric online (SPLC, n.d.-a; SPLC, n.d.-b; SPLC, n.d.-c; SPLC, n.d.-d). These groups are already responsible for multiple civilian deaths, including most recently at the insurrectionary occupation of the U.S. capitol building on January 6, 2021 (Healy, 2020). Such movements often persuasively wield the identity-based and pro-free speech rhetoric of left-leaning collective actors, claiming that they merely want to celebrate their white identity and honor U.S. history through such supposedly benign acts as the maintenance of Confederate memorials (Miller & Graves, 2020).

Historians and scholars of fascism have warned us about the need to treat these movements as a serious threat to the functioning of a liberatory society (Ádám et al, 2020). They have similarly warned us about the potential for otherwise well-meaning civilians of relatively unthreatened socioeconomic standing to pave the way for these movements to achieve state power, such as when the majority of German voters elected Hitler to power (Evans & Alexandra, 2020; King et al, 2008; Mayer, 1997; Snyder, 2016). Librarians, like all U.S. residents, have a responsibility to actively decry and challenge the rise of these movements. Unfortunately, there is precedent for librarians to implicitly support them, such as in 2018 when the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom issued an amendment to the Library Bill of Rights that defended the rights of hate groups to organize in library meeting rooms (ALA, 2019b). The amendment was later revised due to organized opposition by rank-and-file librarians (Schaub, 2018), but made it clear how easy it is to fail to act in solidarity with the marginalized members of our communities targeted by the groups in question. Instead of defending these groups and the movements under which they organize, librarians must expose them for their cooptation of "free speech" as a cover for organizing hatred and bigotry in order to carry out violence (Seiter, 2018). Our profession took an explicitly anti-fascist stance in 1938 as Hitler's dictatorship was coming to power (Robbins, 1996). We must do so again today if we are to support transformative CD efforts like those of mutual aid groups and other leftist social movements, for such work hinges on preventing the rise of nationalistic authoritarianism that promises the violent intensification and expansion of widespread socioeconomic vulnerability.

Conclusion

The transformative CD work undertaken by mutual aid groups throughout history is truly impressive. During COVID-19 alone, mutual aid has allowed community members to keep a roof over their heads, food on the table, and a sense of social isolation at bay. Librarians and researchers have supported these efforts, but COVID-19 mutual aid groups didn't *need* us in order for their work to function successfully. On the contrary, they have become their own experts on community information management and knowledge production. Where knowledge professionals have most effectively strengthened COVID-19 mutual aid and other social movements, we've done so as fellow community members with additional expertise to lend. In other words, we've invested in the health of the community and its members first, and have tried to figure out – in close collaboration with our neighbors – where our professional expertise might be relevant second. While the professional expertise of individual knowledge professionals can be quite useful for social movements, the social and material resources offered through access to an established institution are also numerous. Some of these resources are immediately useful, such as Internet access and meeting space. In a broader sense, though, these institutions lend epistemological legitimization that can popularize movement activity and politics, contradicting state and corporate claims that they constitute fringe elements of society. Our institutionally backed work around information management and knowledge co-production can be another tool in the social movement toolkit – and not the other way around.

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