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Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies

Dawn Betts-Green
Old Dominion University, cbettsgr@odu.edu

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IJIDI: Book Review

McKinney, C. (2020). *Information activism: A queer history of lesbian media technologies*.
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Reviewer: Dawn Betts-Green, Old Dominion University, USA
Book Review Editor: Norda A. Bell, York University, Canada

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Information matters differently to precarious populations for whom reliable access is never guaranteed” (p. 20). While this is true for multiple populations and has remained true over the years, when discussing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) information and resources, this is particularly salient. As a population that has found and still often finds it necessary to be cautious or even secretive about identity, LGBTQ individuals have had to rely on methods with less infrastructure to communicate and preserve information. Frankly, it is surprising that queer history survives at all, which is what makes the work highlighted in Cait McKinney’s *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* even more striking and important.

Looking at the progression of media technologies from analog to digital, *Information Activism* walks the reader through the particular difficulties of communication pre-internet for lesbian communities. Large amounts of information flowed through the physical mail in the form of letters, mimeographed newsletters, and other ephemera; far flung members of these networks would forward clipped newspaper stories and letters filled with news and responses to previous newsletters. Further, McKinney takes us from the original communication and distribution to the more current issue of preservation and archival work. Everything from these early networks plus items such as call logs for hotlines and video and audio cassettes fill archival spaces, creating some typical and some unique concerns.

A primary concern that is well described in this work is the shortcomings of the standard subject headings in terms of queer materials. *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (LCSH) are the standard for libraries and archives alike, but as all who work in information fields should be aware, these and other standard schema are not as useful for queer materials as one would hope. They lack nuance and detail and most often fail to describe queer “materials in sufficient detail or in affirmative, subculturally meaningful terms” (p. 7). Furthermore, a great deal of events and ephemera desired in queer archives leans toward the day-to-day, which also fails to be properly covered in existent cataloging schema. Large events, such as Supreme Court battles or other things covered in national news, have other terms that lend themselves to cataloging with some ease; everyday lives of queer people don’t.

McKinney outlines the issues and minutiae of media technologies and the archiving of lesbian materials extensively, using a media studies approach more often than that of information studies. In this way, we get an interesting look at how the media lends itself to archival practices and representing history but not as much conversation about how any of the media technology

might affect the information itself. Given McKinney's background in communication, this does make sense. However, library and information science (LIS) scholars might find the text lacking if the media-information interaction is of higher importance to them. That being said, both throughout the book and in the epilogue, a conversation appears which is useful for all disciplines: how does social media, digitization, and the ubiquity of the internet affect the accessibility and understanding of queer history?

The commodification of lesbian history drives the epilogue, describing the use of photos and slogans drawn from queer archives, particularly Instagram accounts, both as fodder for reposting and as profit-making ventures. The history is sometimes, but not always, contextualized and labeled in such a way that makes it clear this is historical, that the image is representing a piece of the queer past all but otherwise inaccessible to the viewer were it not for the posting account. McKinney describes the activism of Instagram users who police the lack of historical information and credit to the archive or original creator from whom the object is drawn as well as OtherWild, a company making products with historical images that makes sure the product and its historical context are inextricable. And though this is fascinating, what is more interesting is the underlying discussion of social media "archiving" which is not as focused upon but could, in fact, constitute a body of work all its own.

What it does highlight and what McKinney explicitly points out is the current stress of and on digitization and on the particular intricacies of archival access. Many, even some in academic or archival settings, do not know that these small, queer archives exist, or they do know but are unable to access them due to distance (or currently, the pandemic). This lack of access creates a situation in which the information held here is all but nonexistent to the researcher and, more importantly, the community. Unlike some archival materials, queer archives of everyday interaction and life represent a history that lacks representation and exposure and which the community they represent needs and wants to access—thus, the drive for digitization and distribution on digital platforms. However, the mere fact of an archive's existence online does not automatically equate to people knowing about or finding the collections. In fact, it does not necessarily mean that the entirety of the collection can be online. Archives may or may not have full permissions or ownership of the materials, and even if they do, proper digitization and presentation online is neither simple nor quick, depending on the archive's budget and how much staff or volunteer time can be allotted to the task. And as McKinney notes in reference to a letter from Leslie Feinberg, it is possible that pieces, even important ones, may be backlogged, waiting on processing for lengthy amounts of time, which also adds to the accessibility issue.

Information Activism is a useful text for those interested in the history of community and small archives, specifically those dealing with historically unrepresented populations. I appreciated the discussion of how, though inherently activist and revolutionary, lesbian archives have (and sometimes still do) homogenized difference to create a collecting and cataloging framework that leaves out all but the most mainstream of the community. McKinney notes that "activist work with information can shore up what kind of lesbian life counts as a life worth...preserving in the archive" (p. 23), and this point is at the crux of issues related to queer archiving and information in general. We have long preserved what can best be termed cis white lesbian history, regardless of the level of accessibility, and we need to take the lessons this preservation has taught us about media, archiving, information, and networks and apply it to a more diverse view of history in our community, which McKinney does a good job of scaffolding here.

Dawn Betts-Green (cdbettsgreen@gmail.com) is a Visiting Lecturer for Old Dominion University and the newly named Assistant Director of the Invisible Histories Project, an organization seeking to preserve queer history in the U.S. South. She holds a PhD in Library and Information Studies from Florida State University, and her research interests center on LGBTQIA+ issues in public libraries, particularly small and rural areas of the U.S. South, radical librarianship, information ethics, and information literacy.

