

Software Demonstration: Chicago Underground Library's Community-Based Cataloging System

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Chicago Underground Library (CUL) is a replicable model for community collections. It uses the lens of an archive to examine the creative, political, and intellectual interdependencies of a city, tracing how people have worked together, who influenced whom, where ideas first developed, and how they spread from one publication to another through individuals. We would like to present a brand new version of our cataloging software, built on the open source content management system Drupal, that we eventually hope to provide as a standalone module that any organization can implement as both a technical and theoretical template to start an Underground Library in their own city.

Our collection is Chicago-specific, incorporating everything from well-established publications like *Poetry* magazine and University of Chicago Press to zines made by students at a social justice high school to limited-edition handmade artist's books. "Published" is defined broadly as anything intended for public consumption; likewise, we have no political ideology or agenda: a library that excludes material based on narrow definitions of "small" or "independent" is just as problematic as libraries that ignore it. The collection is 100% inclusive, without making quality or importance judgments, which is very different from traditional curatorial roles. By actively reaching out to collect material from underrepresented communities including immigrants, youth, and work published in educational settings like Young Chicago Authors or Neighborhood Writing Alliance, we are also able to place typically marginalized voices into the wider creative context of Chicago.

CUL's collecting system privileges connections between people and publications over strict regional boundaries. We catalog by every single contributor (authors, editors, typesetters, illustrators, etc.) and compile exhaustive lists of subjects so that users can see how publications are linked by threads of influence and how ideas and movements have developed, creating a network of interdependent primary sources. Because the catalogers focus on all contributors and use non-hierarchical combinations of subjects and keywords, our catalog interfaces extremely well with search engines rather than relying on traditional library catalogs alone. This allows the unique data in our index to display alongside the historical record one might find in search results dominated by publishers with the means to digitize their content, providing a hyperlocal or alternative perspective and reflecting the changing way that users themselves seek information.

In the online catalog we will demonstrate at the Colloquium, users are able to search all of the individuals and subjects, click on contributors' name and find everything else they've worked on throughout their careers, look on a map at where each publication came from and see what's been published in your their neighborhood, and also provide their own historical notes and additions to any catalog entry. Many of the publications in our collection have incomplete data sets because the people who made them never

expected them to wind up in a library. We will be proactively reaching out to people in the community to share their knowledge of different publications in the catalog; tell us stories about where that magazine might have been distributed, who we're missing from the masthead, where the publisher's office might have moved to, which publications hosted readings together, etc. Our catalogers will use these contextual comments to glean more metadata for the catalog entry, but will leave up all the comments and anecdotes as part of the record. We want the catalog to further demonstrate the connections between everyone as much as it helps users navigate to their interests.

CUL is entirely volunteer-run. The catalogers meet once a week and most are librarians, but many others are untrained and they are able to learn our system very quickly.

Why a New Model for Libraries?

Public libraries were built on the notions of free access to information and opportunity to engage the ideas of your time, but they only get us halfway. Their accessibility applies only to consumers, not media producers, and the content available to readers comes mostly from outside of their communities. Public libraries provide a window into the larger conversation, but where do you go to establish a foothold in the conversation itself?

The internet, though paradoxically a system designed to provide global connectivity, is actually an effective model (and argument) for localized libraries. It provides equal access for content producers and consumers; it allows for the formation of communities that are self-moderated and determine their own priorities; it welcomes professionals and non-professionals alike and gives a clearer picture of cultural details, eccentricities, and shifts as they emerge in real time.

Non-professional content receives more attention and respect than in any previous era thanks to the accessibility the internet provides. We can now direct this sentiment at print and other ephemeral media that wasn't given its due simply because of the cultural climate of the era in which it was produced. Countless elements of our community histories that people are only now finally primed to read have already been discarded. Chicago is historically fragmented along ethnic and socio-economic lines and we have found that even within what could be considered established, recognized artistic communities, artists and writers of different forms and genres don't often cross-communicate. Our catalog is designed to make connections evident, historically and contemporaneously.

Localized libraries also answer the question of where you draw the line in choosing what you preserve: You don't. A network of localized libraries can more equally share the burden of storing and disseminating material. Participating in this network has drawn interest from groups in Canada and Seoul, Korea as well as throughout the US. We recognize the importance of public libraries and historical societies, but understand that they serve different publics and perform different functions. The CUL is a supplement to traditional repositories; an alternative, but parallel, history that is interwoven and even frequently overlaps with established, mainstream collections.