

Radical Reference: An American 'Ask the Library' With Radical Overtones. Wettmark, Lennart. *Bibliotek i Samhälle* (BIS) No. 2 p.13 2004 [<http://www.foreningenbis.org/>]

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When a lot of Americans demonstrated at the Republican Party Convention at the end of August and the beginning of September, they had gotten a new information service: Radical Reference.

In an issue of the Internet-based *Library Juice* (7:18; August 27, 2004), editor Rory Litwin wrote about Radical Reference as an adaptation to a post-modern society. It is a Web-based service aimed at a specific ideological and cultural group rather than a geographic one.

Radical Reference has triggered reactions from conservative quarters and been accused of going against ethical professional codes and not being non-partisan and proper. In his article, Rory stated that the criticism was completely wrong and noted that the project was not tied to any institution but rather was based on volunteers. He had gone through questions and answers on the Web and found that the volunteers had done proper and non-partisan work – based on the perspective from which the questions were asked.

*Bibliotek i Samhälle* contacted two of Radical Reference's founders, James Jacobs and Jenna Freedman, to get comments:

[Wettmark] What is Radical Reference?

[Jacobs] Radical Reference is a collective of library workers that includes librarians, library support staff, student librarians, and others who presumably do not have any ties to libraries. We want to work for social and economic justice and equality. We support activists, progressive organizations, and independent journalists by being able to provide professional support and access to information. We cooperate virtually and are devoted information activists in order to promote goals for groups of activists.

[Wettmark] How long have you been in existence?

[Jacobs] We started in July of this year to support demonstrators and activists around the Republicans' national convention in New York City, August 29 – 2 September 2004. There were six people at the start but we have now grown to more than 150 volunteers across the entire United States, who represent archives and libraries, and we can satisfy needs for information in several languages.

[Wettmark] What does the radical part consist of?

[Jacobs] We are challenging traditional American library thinking and the role of the librarian in many ways. First, our service has taken a stance for something and is based on activists. During the protests in New York, we had volunteers out in the streets and they both took part in the protests and gained access to information with help from contact with a locally-based support team. With the help of technology (the Internet, mobile telephones, the Satellite Multiservice System [SMS], and Associative

Index Methods [AIM]), we were able to expand our reference desk to the street and where the need for information existed.

Furthermore we work collectively and with support from one another. We have created a system of working groups, in which everyone is supposed to have the power to take part and shape the radical reference service of the future.

[Wettmark] Do you have a special home page?

[Jacobs] Our home page was very popular during the convention and has continued to be so. We got and answered more than 50 questions that were asked via our form on the Internet. Every question and answer is on the home page. They dealt with everything from suggestions for books about anarchism, research about legislation concerning short-wave radio in the 1940's to information about war profiteers among American companies. The questions come from independent journalists, researchers and progressive organizations, as well as high school students.

[Wettmark] How has Radical Reference been received?

[Jacobs] Our experiences are overwhelmingly positive. We got a lot of feedback from satisfied information seekers and we were contacted by the mass media, for example, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Wall Street Journal*, National Public Radio, and *Library Journal*. Above and beyond our information service, we also arrange seminars on fact-checking for independent journalists and we are also involved in the New York City Independent Media Center's picture archive.

[Wettmark] What will happen to Radical Reference?

[Freedman] I don't know whether our project will exist permanently but I believe we are the first ones turning to a geographically dispersed but well-defined group of users and can offer a large number of different services. One important thing, after the Republican convention, is that we are moving ahead and offering independent journalists both research and fact-checking support. We want to develop into becoming a news library in the world-wide network of Independent Media Centers.

[Wettmark] So what can ordinary libraries learn from you?

[Freedman] To identify a need outside the limits of the traditional library – and satisfy it. I don't want to suggest that libraries aren't already doing that, service to guest workers is an excellent example. What differentiates us is that our target group is not that easy to phone. They can be located anywhere at all. They can be people of all ages, with different backgrounds, ethnic and economic. The most important thing I think is that we are a part of what we are serving. That is quite obvious for most libraries, but it feels like I am a more integrated part of this than I am in my work at my academic library. Many of us had already been activists when we became a part of this project: Donning a Radical Reference hat and grabbing a Ready Reference Kit just gave us something to do –another way to contribute – at protests.

<http://www.radicalreference.info> or, via e-mail: [info@radicalreference.info](mailto:info@radicalreference.info).