Hacking and Making in the Library Community: Access and Code4Lib.

Hacking and Making

The term "hacker" entered the mainstream by 1983 - the year the geek cult-classic movie War Games was released - but it was not until the early 2000s that a subculture of "hacker librarians" became established. Openly identifying with open-source software, willing and able to do in-house software development to support the goals of librarianship, hacker librarians were born in systems departments, but quickly spread throughout information organizations. They began to be involved not only in library automation, but in e-resource access, digitization projects, discovery systems, data management, and public services. The classic statement with respect to hacker librarians comes from Roy Tennant's *LIbrary Journal* column of November 2003, which begins:

> There is a subculture of librarians that could make a significant impact on the profession. They are women and men, youthful and experienced alike, who all share one thing: a passion for solving problems by creating software. They are hacker librarians.[1]

Since then, of course, the wide-spread access to and adoption of open-source software and programming instruction has broadened the scope of library hacking. But the ubiquity of information technology in all fields has also helped to spread the hacking mindset beyond the goal of creating software. Hacking is itself a particular stream of a very broad-based DIY ("do-it-yourself") culture that developed in the late-1960s and early-1970s in response to the pressures of consumerism, disposable culture, and the homogenization of cultural activities and artefacts. Maker culture, the focus of this edition of *Feliciter,* is another such stream, and hacking can perhaps be defined as "maker-culture with a focus on information technology".

Hackfests

In the library world, hackfests provide a unique opportunity for information workers in all areas to get together in a semi-structured way, to focus on particular problems suggested by the attendees. Hackfests are by no means restricted to programmers and systems librarians: metadata librarians, designers, public services staff, and managers, can all provide valuable input into the software project under investigation. The amount of collaboration that comes out of library hackfests is enormous, especially considering that a hackfest has little or no overhead. In addition, non-library hackfests can be good opportunities for library workers to participate in broader communities. Given their expertise in metadata, data modelling, and lightweight, rapid software development, library workers have a lot to contribute to non-library hackfests.

Access

Over the years, various groups and organizations have arisen to share library technology skills, research, and new developments. By the time Roy Tennant was writing about hacker librarians, DIY library-technology hacking had become ingrained in the way library technology conferences operated. The first of what would become the annual Access conference was held in St John's in 1994, and in 2002 the first conference

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[1] Roy Tennant, “Where Librarians Go to Hack,” *Library Journal*, November 15, 2003, http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2003/11/ljarchives/where-librarians-go-to-hack/,

hackfest was introduced. At the end of each day, those who were interested would get together to hack on a library problem. This daily model of conference hackfest didn't really work, as hackers of any description will often stay up late into the night obsessed with working on their problem. At subsequent conferences, a full-day preconference hackfest has been organized.

The Access conference brings together library workers in many areas: systems, software development, cataloguing and metadata, and administration. The presentation topics can range from very technically detailed ("The SFU Library Open Data API") to more high-level discussions around technology, culture, and policy ("Culture Clash: IT Experimentation, Innovation, and Failure in Libraries")[2]. But there is no organization behind Access; each year's organizing committee takes the reins for a year and then hands them off to whoever is chosen to host the conference next. Relationships formed at Access persist between conferences over email and social media. The 2014 Access Conference will be held in Calgary.

Code4lib

When a movement arose in the United States to bring library technologists together, Access was used as a model, though from the beginning there was a little more organization. Code4Lib began first as a listserv in 2003, and put on its first conference in 2006. The conference was very similar to Access (single stream format, and with a similar diversity of attendees and a similar scope for presentations). Rather than a hackfest, however, Code4Lib conferences generally have hands-on pre-conferences focusing on particular tools or technologies.

Because there is no formal organization behind Code4Lib, regional self-organized and self-directed groups began to get together on their own. Code4Lib provides a wiki which anyone who's interested may edit to announce details of their local Code4Lib meetups, and a listserv for communicating to the whole Code4Lib community. It was probably the fact that the Code4Lib listserv and wiki continue between conferences that led groups in Canada to form regional associations under the Code4Lib name rather than Access. Many Canadian library technologists are active both at Access and in the Code4Lib channels.

Code4Lib in Canada

The first Code4Lib chapter in Canada was Code4Lib North, which began in Ontario in 2010. This was followed by Code4Lib Great Eastern, which covers the Atlantic Provinces, in 2012. 2013 saw the creation of two more local Code4Lib chapters: Code4Lib BC and Code4Lib Edmonton. Each of these chapters has been active in organizing events bringing library technologists in their region together to share knowledge, skills, and best practices. Because Code4Lib is not highly organized, many of the local groups have their own communication avenues (including social media), with a more central communication occurring through the main Code4Lib listserv and documentation of events on the Code4Lib Wiki.

Code4Lib Edmonton

Under the name Code4Lib Edmonton, members of the academic, public, and government library communities, as well as students in library and information science and humanities computing came together to discuss topics related to library technology. At first, these meetings were mainly social, with opportunities for fairly specialized shop-talk. It was agreed that, in the beginning, the commitment to

[2] “Schedule”, Access Conference, accessed November 1, 2013, http://accessconference.ca/schedule/.

Code4Lib activities should not be too onerous. In the fall of 2013, they hosted an evening of lightning talks, with presenters drawn from academic and public libraries, combined with a tour of Edmonton Public Library's new makerspace.

Code4Lib BC

Code4Lib BC's first annual event - a two-day unconference - was held on November 28th and 29th at Simon Fraser University. Following the unconference model, in which conference attendees determine and drive the conference programme, the event saw lightning talks in the mornings with hackfests in the afternoon. The unconference model makes for a community-led, practical and flexible mini-conference, drawing on the most hands-on components of the Access and Code4Lib conferences.

The Future of Hacking in Libraries

As maker culture continues to develop, and as makerspaces become more and more connected with modern conceptions of the library, so too will the idea of libraries as "hacking spaces". Both software development and data analysis/vizualisation can solve problems important to both libraries and their users. Given the grassroots infrastructure provided mainly by public libraries in support of makerspaces, and the ongoing success of both Access and Code4Lib, as well as increased access to programming instruction, I think we are moving beyond Roy Tennant's *prospective* characterization towards an actual situation in which hacking in libraries becomes the norm. The community of hacker librarians (both programmers and non-programmers) is diverse and welcoming, and provides a good indicator that the skills needed for incorporating maker-culture, libraries, and software development, have a strong and robust future.

Links

Access Conference: accessconference.ca
Code4Lib Wiki: http://wiki.code4lib.org/
Code4Lib Journal: http://journal.code4lib.org/