

Systems Integration Analysis: The Anarchist Library

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Background

The Anarchist Library is “an archive focusing on anarchism and anarchist texts.” (Anarchist Library, n.d.-a, par. 1) Initiated in 2007 by an anarchist organizer known as Aragorn!, the purpose of the project was to enable the free collection and distribution of anarchist materials in an open digital format for anyone to browse and read. The Library runs on A-Muse-Wiki, a free library-oriented wiki engine; as a wiki, any user can add and edit the library collection, which is managed by a community of volunteer librarians. The Anarchist Library has since become the template for many similar projects by anarchists around the world, now gathered into a multilingual and transnational network via the website AnarchistLibraries.net (marco, 2018; Anarchist Libraries, n.d.).

Systems Integration

The Anarchist Library uses no linear category system, perhaps because this is a digital collection with no need for linear sorting; users can browse the collection by *Author* or *Topic* (a user-generated tagging system) or use the search function, which offers additional controlled vocabulary limiters such as *Document type* and *Page count*. Because the library lacks a managed thesaurus, Topic tags contain many redundant terms (such as “african americans” and “African Americans”); while some librarians on the project have recognized this issue and addressed it in specific cases (Anonymous, 2021) a lack of structural solutions combined with the steady influx of new submissions makes it an ongoing problem. While tagging is certainly a reflection of anarchist principles, the collection could benefit from a slightly more centralized system of subject headings.

Resources can be submitted to the library as raw text using a simple text-input interface. Other fields provided at resource submission reflect the Library’s content schema: *Title* (/“*Title for sorting*”), *Subtitle*, *Author*(/ *Authors*), *Topics*, *Source*, *Original Publication Date*, and *Unique Registry Identifier* (Anarchist Library, n.d.-b). Volunteer librarians proofread and assess the relevancy of submissions before adding them to the collection, at which point they can be downloaded freely in a variety of formats, including .html, .pdf, and .epub. A suite of “bookbuilder” tools allows users to compile, excerpt, and reformat resources for purposes of distribution, printing, and reading (Anarchist Library, n.d.-c).

Conclusion

The Anarchist Library is, to me, an unapologetic child of the best parts of Web 2.0. While its loose, ad hoc character and barebones presentation might risk making it a stereotype of a disordered anarchist project, I have not encountered an archive anywhere online that makes it simpler to read, download, and edit texts. This ease of use is no doubt made possible in part by the Library’s principled rejection of intellectual property and copyright law - while the ethics of this kind of distribution are debatable in certain cases such as the livelihoods of authors, the Library presents a striking picture of what our digital infrastructure can achieve in the hands of a few dedicated idealists unburdened by licensing.

References

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