President's Message

Andromeda Yelton

Before I dive into my column, I'd like to recognize and thank Bob Gerrity for his six years of service as ITAL's Editor in Chief. He oversaw our shift from a traditional print journal to a fully online one, recognized by Micah Vandegrift and Chealsye Bowley as having the strongest open-access policies of all LIS journals (http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/healthyself/). I'd like to further extend a welcome to Ken Varnum as our new Editor in Chief. Ken's distinguished record of LITA service includes stints on the ITAL Editorial Board and the LITA Board of Directors, so he knows the journal very well and I am enthusiastic about its future under his lead.

I'm particularly curious to see what will be discussed in ITAL under Ken's leadership because I've just come back from two outstanding conferences which drove home the significance of the issues we wrestle with in library technology, and I'm looking forward to a third.

In early November, I attended LITA Forum in scenic Denver. The schedule was packed with sessions on intriguing topics – too many, of course, for me to attend them all – but two in particular stand out to me. In one, Sam Kome detailed how he's going about a privacy audit at the Claremont Colleges Library. He walked us through an extensive – and sometimes surprising – list of places personally identifiable information can lurk on library and campus systems, and talked through what his library absolutely needs (which is less than he'd thought, and far less than the library has been logging without thinking about it). In the other, Mary Catherine Lockmiller took a design thinking approach to serving transgender populations. She shared a fantastic, practical LibGuide (http://libguides.southmountaincc.edu/transgenderresources), but the part that stuck with me most is her statement that many trans people may never physically enter a library because public spaces are not safe spaces; for this population, our electronic services *are* our public services. As technologists, we create the point of first, and maybe only, contact.

A week later, I attended the inaugural Data for Black Lives conference (http://d4bl.org/) at the MIT Media Lab, steps from my office. This was – and I think everyone in the room felt it – something genuinely new. From the galvanizing topic, to the sophisticated visual and auditory design, to the frisson of genius and creativity buzzing all around a room of artists, activists, professors, poets, data scientists and software engineers, it was a remarkable experience for us all.

Those of you who heard Dr. Safiya Noble speak at Thomas Dowling's LITA President's program in 2016 are familiar with algorithmic bias. Numerous speakers discussed this at D4BL: the ways that racial disparities in underlying data sets can be replicated, magnified, and given a veneer of objective power when run through the black boxes that power predictive policing or risk assessment for bail hearings. Absent and messy data was a theme as well: in a moment that would make many librarians chuckle (and then wince) knowingly, a panel of music industry executives estimated that 40% of their metadata is wrong, thus making it impossible to credit and compensate artists appropriately.

Andromeda Yelton (andromeda.yelton@gmail.com) is LITA President 2017-18 and Senior Software Engineer, MIT Libraries, Cambridge, United States.

And yet – in a memorable keynote – Dr. Ruha Benjamin called on us not only to collect data about black death, as she showed us an image of the ambulance bill sent to Tamir Rice's family, but to listen to our artists and poets as we use our data to imagine black *life* – this in front of an image of Wakanda. With our data and our creativity, what new worlds can we map?

Several of my MIT colleagues also attended D4BL, and as we discussed it afterward we started thinking about how these ideas can drive our own work. How does the imaginary world of Wakanda connect to the archival imaginary, and what worlds can we empower our own creators to imagine with what we collect and preserve? How can we use our data literacy and access to sometimes un-Googleable resources to help community groups collate data on important issues that are not tracked by our public institutions, such as police violence (https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/) or racial disparities in setting bail?

With these ideas swirling in my mind, I am looking forward with tremendous excitement to LITA Forum 2018. Building on the work of our Forum Assessment Task Force, we'll be doing a lot of things differently; in particular, aiming for lots of hands-on, interactive sessions. This will be a conference where, whether you're a presenter or an attendee, you'll be able to *do* things. And these last two conferences have driven home for me how very much there is to do in of library technology. Our work to select, collect, preserve, clean, and provide access to data can indeed have enormous impact. Technology services are front-line services.