President's Message:
Focus on Information Ethics

Aimee Fifarek

Just a few weeks ago we held yet another successful LITA Forum[1], this time in Fort Worth, TX. Tight travel budgets and time constraints mean that only a few hundred people get to attend Forum each year, but that is one of the things that make it a great conference. Because of its size you have a realistic chance of meeting everyone there, whether it's at Game Night, one of the many networking dinners, or just for during hallway chitchat after a session. And the sessions really do give you something to talk about.

This year I couldn't help but notice a theme. Among all the talk about makerspace technologies, analytics, and specific software platforms, the one bubble that kept rising to the surface was information ethics. Why are you doing what you are doing with the information you have, and should you really be doing it? Have you stopped to think what impact collecting, posting, sharing that information is going to have on the world around you? In a post-election environment replete with talk of fake news and other forms of deliberate misinformation, LITA Forum presenters seem to have tapped in to the zeitgeist.

Tara Robertson, in her closing keynote[2], talked about the harm digitizing analog materials can do when what is depicted is sensitive to individuals and communities. Waldo Jaquith of US Open Data talked about how a government decision to limit options on a birth certificate to either "white" or "colored" effectively wiped the native population out of political existence in Virginia. And Sam Kome from Claremont Colleges talked about how well-meaning librarians can facilitate privacy invasion merely by collecting operational statistics[3]. There were many other examples brought out by Forum speakers but these in particular emphasized the real consequences the serious consequences the use of data – intentional or not – can have on people.

I think it is time for librarians[4] to get more vocal about information ethics and the role we play in educating the population about humane information use. Our profession has always been forward thinking about information literacy and is traditionally known for helping our communities make judgements about the information they consume. But we have not done enough to declare our expertise in the information economy, to stand up and say "we're librarians – this is what we do."

Now, more than ever, people need the skills to think critically about the information they are consuming via all kinds of media, understand the consequences of allowing algorithms to shape their information universe, and make quality judgments about trading their personal information for goods and services. To quote from UNESCO:

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Changes brought about by the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT) not only open tremendous opportunities to humankind but also pose unprecedented ethical challenges. Ensuring that information society is based upon principles of mutual respect and the observance of human rights is one of the major ethical challenges of the 21st century.[5]

I challenge all librarians to make a commitment to propagating information ethics, both personally and professionally. Make an effort to get out of your social media echo chamber[6] and engage with uncomfortable ideas. When you see biased information being shared consider it a "teachable moment" and highlight the spin or present more neutral information. And if your library is not actively making information literacy and information ethics part of its programming and instruction, then do what you can to change it. Offer to be on a panel, create a curriculum, or host a program that includes key concepts relating to information "ownership, access, privacy, security, and community"[7]. The focus of the Libraries Transform campaign this year is all about our expertise: "Because the best search engine in the Library is the Librarian"[8] It's our time to shine.

REFERENCES

1. http://forum.lita.org/home/

2. http://forum.lita.org/speakers/tara-robertson/

3. http://forum.lita.org/sessions/patron-activity-monitoring-and-privacy-protection/

4. As always, when I use the term "librarian" my intention is to include any person who works in a library and is skilled in information and library science, not to limit the reference to those who hold a library degree.

5. http://en.unesco.org/themes/ethics-information

6. https://www.wnyc.org/story/buzzfeed-echo-chamber-online-news-politics/

7. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_ethics

8. http://www.ilovelibraries.org/librariestransform/