

The Great Unravelling: Unmaking and Remaking Information Worlds

John Burgess,^a Juliana Mestre^b, Tyler Youngman^c, and Beth Patin^d

^aUniversity of Alabama, USA

^bRutgers University, USA

^cEast Carolina University, USA

^dSyracuse University, USA

jtfburgess@ua.edu, juliana.mestre@rutgers.edu, youngmant25@ecu.edu, bjpatin@syr.edu

ABSTRACT

The ‘Great Unraveling’ is a term that encapsulates the gradual unspooling of environmental and social systems essential to human prosperity (Heinberg & Miller, 2023). It serves as a critical counter-narrative to prevailing discourses of either unchecked technological progress or inevitable collapse—both of which often lead to passive acceptance of the status quo. Instead, the Great Unraveling suggests that systemic deterioration is already in motion, compelling us to consider whether and how intervention is possible. This panel will explore the role of library and information science (LIS) professionals in addressing these challenges, emphasizing the need for resilience, adaptation, and decolonization.

The metaphor of unraveling evokes a powerful image: a well-worn fabric slowly coming apart, thread by thread. This process illustrates how the interconnected systems that uphold society—including libraries and archives—are increasingly vulnerable to disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturns, geopolitical instability, and the ongoing polycrisis all highlight the fragility of these institutions. The concept of polycrisis, first introduced by Edgar Morin (1999), describes the compounding and interdependent crises—ecological, social, economic—that threaten global stability. In this context, LIS professionals are not merely passive observers; they must actively engage in understanding, mitigating, and even reversing the unraveling process where possible.

A central theme of this panel is the intersection between the Great Unraveling and the need for decolonization within LIS. Decolonization, as Smith (2012) and Tuck & Yang (2012) emphasize, is not a metaphor but an ongoing process of dismantling colonial structures embedded in knowledge systems, bureaucratic practices, and cultural norms. Decolonization restores Indigenous worldviews as foundational to knowledge organization and dissemination (Lilley, 2021). Libraries have historically functioned as repositories of dominant knowledge paradigms, often marginalizing Indigenous, non-Western, and alternative epistemologies. The

imperative, then, is to use this moment of systemic unraveling to create space for knowledge systems that have historically been suppressed and to recommit ourselves to supporting communities who have experienced epistemicide and epistemic injustices (Patin et al., 2021).

The panel will challenge attendees to consider the moral and ethical imperatives of LIS in an era of unraveling: How can LIS professionals integrate resilience-building into their work? What does it mean to create an epistemically just library system? How can libraries serve as hubs for decolonial knowledge production and community empowerment? In posing such questions, we must acknowledge when systems are broken, we cannot just fix it: we have to rebuild. Akin to a controlled burn in forest management, we must hold space to enable new and renewed ways of being and knowing in LIS: we must deconstruct in order to reconstruct. Against the relentless forces of onto-epistemicide (Patin et al., 2024), we must resist the urge to solely fix what we know about the world, rather, we must reconsider how we exist within and alongside the world itself.

In collaboration with the audience, panelists will work to identify actionable steps for incorporating themes of resilience, decolonization, and community engagement into LIS practice. Rather than viewing the unraveling as an insurmountable crisis, this discussion reframes it as an opportunity—a chance to mend broken systems, restore neglected knowledge traditions, and forge new, equitable pathways for the future of information stewardship.

Ultimately, the Great Unraveling is woven from the threads of history, philosophy, and ethics. Understanding what has happened, how we think about it, and what we do about it determines whether we merely witness the unmaking of our systems or actively participate in their transformation. This panel will argue that LIS professionals are uniquely positioned to not only document the unraveling but to engage in the vital work of reweaving—creating stronger, more inclusive, and more resilient networks of knowledge for the generations to come.

PANEL FORMAT

Welcome: Meditation, Grounding, and Setting Intentions (5 minutes) Guided Reading to provide context (5 minutes)

Shout it Out: Shout out of concerns/worries from the audience (15 minutes)

• What can we discuss? What do you hope to gain?

Panel Presentations (working in shout-outs from the crowd) 40 minutes

- Making Good (Ethics) - John Burgess
- Hauntology (Philosophy) - Juliana Mestre
- Pastmaking (History) - Tyler Youngman

Shout it out – what are your hopes, solutions, and resolutions (20 minutes)

- How can we shift our practice?
- What's the thing you are taking with you?
- What are your worries and concerns?
- What are your hopes and aspirations?

Closing – Holding onto one thread - artistic activity (5 minutes)

PANELISTS

John T. F. Burgess is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator for Teaching Excellence at the University of Alabama’s School of Library and Information Studies. Their research expertise is in information ethics and moral reasoning and includes scholarship on incorporating sustainability in the LIS curriculum, and on applying sustainability ethics to academic library practice. They developed the course Sustainability in LIS at UA, which emphasizes how librarians can work with local leaders to promote community resilience.

Juliana Mestre is a PhD Candidate in Communication, Information, and Media at Rutgers University. Her research focuses on philosophy of information, and she is specifically interested in using post-structuralist and deconstructionist perspectives in order to challenge foundational assumptions in information ontology, epistemology, and ethics.

Tyler Youngman is an Assistant Professor at East Carolina University’s Interdisciplinary Studies Department. His research studies destruction and erasure as a consequence of how we do things with documents. He currently works on projects related to pastmaking, epistemicide, bibliography, cultural heritage informatics, and philosophy of information.

Beth Patin is an Associate Professor at Syracuse University’s School of Information Studies. Her research focuses on community resilience, crisis informatics, and cultural responsiveness. She is currently studying epistemicide or the loss of knowledge systems and exploring the role of digital humanities in preserving history and storytelling.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Critical Librarianship; Sociology of Information; Community Engagement; Information Ethics.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Philosophy of Information; Sustainability; Polycrisis; Hauntology; Epistemicide.

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