

Future States of the Research Library

Claire Stewart, University of Nebraska—Lincoln Libraries

What can be said about the year 2021 that hasn't already been said? Challenging, unprecedented, extraordinary in almost every way, 2021 even surpassed the previous *annus horribilis*, 2020. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to ripple humanity-wide, ceaselessly rebounding off, and cruelly amplifying, almost every kind of inequity and social challenge. A long overdue reckoning with the legacies of racism in the United States did not materialize in any truly transformative way, political discord worsened, and anti-science voices grew to dominate what should have been rational conversations about a coherent and collective response to a profound global health threat. It was within this context that the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) planned its 2021 meetings, which continued as virtual gatherings for a second year. Recognizing the monumentality of the change upon us, the committee of organizers planned the spring and fall 2021 meetings as a series, devoting the spring meeting to hearing from experts, mostly from outside of research libraries, on a set of broad issues, with the fall meeting more specifically focused on the library response and to understanding its evolving context. “The Big Pivot,” as we dubbed the meeting sequence, gave us time and space to grapple with major forces reshaping every aspect of our society, to work to understand them more deeply, and to contextualize their implications for our libraries and institutions. In this issue of *Research Library Issues (RLI)*, we reflect on some of the topics explored in 2021 with a forward look to the conversations and work continuing into 2022.

Radical Changes to Teaching and Implications for Libraries and Our Workforce

In early 2020, most of our libraries closed, at least temporarily, amid abrupt cancellations of in-person classes and the dramatic and rapid shift to online teaching. While most research libraries have for many years been constructing and using a robust online library toolkit of

electronic content subscriptions, remote research consultations, email- and chat-based help, and online library course guides, the impact of the change on teaching faculty was profoundly disruptive. In his introduction to the spring meeting's "COVID-19: A Catalyst for Innovative Course Delivery" session, Matthew Rascoff, who recently moved from a role leading teaching innovation at Duke University to a new position at Stanford University, suggested that we did not experience a transition to true online learning so much as a yearlong experiment in faculty professional development. This experiment did, however, set the stage for significant and meaningful work towards innovative online learning, conversations that eventually led to real curricular advances, particularly, as Dominique Scheffel-Dunand (York University) submitted, at network scale. She referenced initiatives in Canada to create teaching portals and repositories, where above-the-course sharing and affordances of networked learning demand more sophisticated approaches to reuse, knowledge classification, and intellectual property, areas where librarians' expertise is particularly valuable. Opportunities have also arisen to leverage the technology to responsibly recommit to core values, particularly those, like privacy, that librarians have long championed, and to create more equitable spaces in which to provide the support and connectedness so diminished by the loss of a physical teaching environment. Josh Eyer (University of Mississippi) underscored an imperative to confront the tremendous emotional and physical toll that pandemic-forced remote teaching was having not only on students, but also on faculty and staff. Rascoff posed a challenge to embrace a new, overarching, and galvanizing goal, one that might be a worthy successor to the unprecedented achievement of successfully transitioning entire institutions to online teaching. Perhaps a similar, unifying goal to place equity and care squarely and immovably at the core of the educational experience, and to ground decisions that profoundly impact student success, such as course grading policies, to the learning goals they seek to advance, might not be out of reach for an academic community that has achieved what we have with the big pivot of 2020.

In the Fall 2021 Association Meeting, the conversation about teaching and learning continued with a focus on the impact a massive and sustained shift (if time proves it to **be** a sustained shift) to online might have on physical library spaces. So many libraries have transformed in recent decades to include active and social learning spaces, critical extensions to the in-person classroom and indispensable resources for student communities that vanished from campus in the span of a few short weeks in 2020. While acknowledging that the subsequent pressure to reopen and restaff libraries itself signaled some measure of our enduring centrality and value, it was also clearly an occasion to reconsider the meaning of library as place. Closing physical collections for months on end, curtailing service, and dramatically reducing seating capacity to meet social distancing requirements: what would the return to the library space post-pandemic look like, and what would it mean to the institution? Justin Moore, of the Mellon Foundation's Humanities in Place initiative, and Shrey Majmudar, a Duke University student, spoke both to the traditional and to the unique and evolving concepts of library space. Community, connectedness, healing, and serendipity loomed large. Kornelia Tancheva (University of Pittsburgh) spoke of the imperative to focus on spaces for people and active knowledge creation over spaces for general collections and passive information consumption. She expands on the session's conversations in her article in this issue.

The fall 2021 meeting concluded with critical conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) with librarians from underrepresented groups and about the future of library work. The ARL Leadership and Career Development Program (LCDP) fellows led the closing session, speaking to the assembled membership about the cohort learning communities they built and sustained under incredibly difficult circumstances, and of their high expectations that library leadership will follow through on promises to center DEIA, to more decisively move to dismantle systemic barriers within organizations, and to shift from thinking about low representation of Black, Indigenous, and other persons of color (BIPOC) in the

profession as a pipeline problem to a problem of lack of commitment. Martha Alvarado Anderson (University of Arkansas), a member of the LCDP cohort, reflects on these conversations and experiences in her article.

Understanding the History and Impact of Misinformation and Anti-intellectualism

Two sessions of the spring 2021 ARL meeting brought attendees into dialogue with scholars whose research interrogates key information phenomena with deep impacts on contemporary life. In their article exploring misinformation and disinformation, Jeffery Loo and Erik Mitchell (University of California, San Diego) consider the perspectives on disordered information discussed in a panel with Clara Chu (University of Illinois), Sarah Sobieraj (Tufts University), and Whitney Phillips (Syracuse University). Summarizing and jumping off from the context discussed in the meeting, Mitchell and Loo focus on health misinformation and potential interventions where libraries may be able to play a role.

Anti-intellectualism and anti-science attitudes are not phenomena born of the COVID-19 era. Three social scientists provided historical context and theories explicating their origin and current dynamics, with a particular focus on the impact of anti-intellectualism on public health. Matthew Motta (Oklahoma State University) started by revisiting the origins of the term's three frames in Richard Hofstadter's 1963 book, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, putting emphasis on the negative affect towards scientists and other experts as the most crucial of the three. Motta noted anti-intellectual attitudes' persistent presence in longitudinal US opinion polls, and the continuity from George Wallace's invocation of "pointy-headed intellectuals" in the late '60s to former President Donald Trump's frequent invectives against science and academics.

Eric Merkley's (University of Toronto) research measures connections between political polarization and anti-intellectualism, finding that,

while anti-intellectual views seem to be as prevalent in the United States as in Canada, in the US, they are more sorted by political affiliation. In studies of response to changing advice around masking in Canada in 2020, his research shows anti-intellectual views have much stronger connections with responses to expert advice than with political ideology or science literacy, indicating the profound impact such views have had on public health response. Colleen Shogan (Georgetown University), a scholar of the US presidency, expanded on the instrumental and political value of anti-intellectual views, with examples dating as far back as the Eisenhower era and as recent as the concerted attacks on Anthony Fauci's credibility.

In these contexts, a link between anti-intellectual views and rejection of recommended COVID-19 precautions isn't all that surprising. But seeing the strong connection Motta's research shows between episodically intense periods of anti-intellectual feeling and public funding for US educational initiatives underscores the extent to which these are no brief storms to be weathered. Anyone who has observed the erosion of financial support for public higher education in the US may not be taken aback to see how clearly this links with correspondingly clear patterns of anti-intellectual attitudes, counterproductive as it may be that funding for scientific research and development is poised to decline in the very periods in which we are best able to manage threats in our world thanks to that very research.

Perhaps most critical for those of us in the information professions, scholars in both panels conclude that solutions can't be found in amplifying visibility of higher-quality information, providing more and better information, fact-checking, or boosting science- or information-literacy skills in our college student populations. Emotions, the interplay of content creation and consumption, the mechanisms of social media platforms, and even the perverse incentives of more traditional mass-media platforms, shape our information diets much more profoundly. So too do the complex relationships and connections between systems and structures, what Phillips terms the information

ecosystem. As Loo and Mitchell explore in their article, a whole-society approach, deploying everything we know about psychology and the importance of the familiar to building trust in information messages, will be essential to redressing a now heavily polluted information ecosystem.

Where does this lead our profession? We have been deliberately interrogating traditional assumptions of library as neutral party, fostering a far more complex conception of our role. The world around us seems to want to redefine and challenge the meaning of previously self-evident values at the heart of our professional work: truth, facts, and free speech, for example. And in the case of the latter, as Phillips indicates, this attempted redefinition frequently unfolds in bad faith contexts that do not genuinely seek to advance freedom of speech, but which often serve as vectors of misinformation. We are also challenged by Chu's emerging concept of de- or sub-information, a disordered approach to information that silences or appropriates voices, or that relies on stereotypes to devalue the stories of certain communities. The opportunity is ours to pursue projects that preserve agency, a broader conception of knowledge, and that embrace appropriate regimes of information access: mindful of historic traumas and supporting culturally appropriate restrictions based on community values and Indigenous sovereignty.

Truth Commissions and Roles for Libraries and Archives

ARL and the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) have been exploring the connections between libraries and archives and national truth movements for several years, including in sessions at our recent Association Meetings. A fall 2017 session focused on the University of Manitoba's response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the University of Virginia's work to document the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally and the community response to that deadly event, along with increasing incidents of violence and violent threats by white supremacist, anti-government, and insurrectionist groups. A Spring 2019 Association

Meeting session heard from American and Canadian higher education leaders working to advance a US Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation movement and follow through on the 94 calls to action from the 2015 Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹ At the fall 2021 meeting, Bryan Brayboy (Arizona State University) and Sheila Cote-Meek (York University) offered Indigenous perspectives on the generational trauma inflicted on their peoples through residential school programs and the ongoing legacies of colonialism in Canada and the United States. Cote-Meek emphasized the importance of truth and the imperative that non-Indigenous people should confront the truth before any reconciliation would be possible. Brayboy and Cote-Meek both spoke of the complex challenge of understanding truth in a pervasive context of stolen land, devaluation of traditional knowledge, and an educational framework almost entirely constructed around a colonial and western concept of learning.

Two weeks after the Fall 2021 Association Meeting, ARL hosted a conversation with the co-leaders of the United States movement for Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT). Charles Chavis (George Mason University) and Marcus Hunter (University of California, Los Angeles) introduced the Association to the movement for a national commission to study the legacy and systemic impacts of slavery and to the plans for a corresponding digital archive. The proposed archive, known as the Archive for Racial and Cultural Healing, or simply ARCH, will contain digitized historical materials as well as the capacity for communities to “archive themselves.” It will be a living, growing, interconnected digital archive to serve communities and learners at all levels, and to bring resources to the communities themselves. A frame for the work of truth-telling is deeply embedded in the concepts of both commission and archive, and in an indispensable prerequisite to any consideration of transformation or reconciliation.

Future States of the Research Library

A thread running strongly through the 2021 ARL meetings emphasizes connection, community, trust, care, and truth-telling. What should

this mean for research libraries, especially those in historically white institutions, as we look to the future? How do we reposition our intellectual, financial, and physical resources for the greatest good? As Bryan Brayboy tells us: “One of the things institutions have to figure out is that people come with knowledge, so you can’t just take our systems of knowledge and our beliefs and extract them...people have to be present. [Knowledge is] lived, it’s embodied, it’s embedded in our very beings.”² Current approaches to knowledge and its organization are far too narrow to sustain the needs of a diverse society that seeks to understand why our systems perpetuate such profound inequities. Everything from intra- and inter-organizational power structures to concepts of ownership and funding must be deeply interrogated. We are deeply aware of the dysfunction in academic publishing and reward systems but struggle to effectively change it. We may be actively working to address gaps and silences in library collections, to elevate voices that have been ignored historically, but if anything, the dominant contemporary information ecosystem is even more toxic and hostile to women and minorities than past systems. The information phenomena it promotes negatively impact public investments in education and thwart science-based public health programs. To have any hope of countering these at times overwhelming realities, our commitments must be far-reaching, for these are no brief storms. Myths of our national origins and racial identities were intentionally constructed and have been built upon for centuries; they have inflicted disproportionate harm on Indigenous and Black communities, but, as the co-leaders of ARCH and the THRT movement note,³ all citizens have suffered, everyone has a race, and everyone must be involved in the truth-telling essential to racial healing. In the preface to its 2015 report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada notes: “Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one. Virtually all aspects of Canadian society may need to be reconsidered.”⁴ That breadth should also frame our thinking about future states of the research library, with every part of our work open for reconsideration as we continue these conversations into 2022.

© Claire Stewart



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

To cite this article: Stewart, Claire. “Future States of the Research Library.” *Research Library Issues*, no. 303 (2022): 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.29242/rli.303.1>.

Endnotes

- 1 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action,” 2015, https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.
- 2 Sheila Cote-Meek and Bryan Brayboy, “Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation in the US and Canada” (presentation, Fall 2021 Association of Research Libraries Meeting, October 6, 2021), <https://www.arl.org/schedule-for-fall-2021-association-meeting/>.
- 3 “Member Session: US Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Movement, October 13, 2021,” Association of Research Libraries, 2021, <https://www.arl.org/member-resources/member-session-us-truth-racial-healing-and-transformation-movement-2021-10-13/>.
- 4 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,” 2015, <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.800288/publication.html>.