From the Chair

Who, Me?

Shari Laster

Professional identity is a curious thing. Like many in our line of work, when I'm asked what I do, I often experience a long moment of hesitation. Is my job title enough? Does it explain my work in a way that fits the context of the conversation? What is it about what I do that's important, or relevant, or interesting, that I want to communicate? What is it that I really do, anyway? I certainly go to meetings and write emails and update my calendar, but what do I accomplish with all of that? And why should it matter to the person who is asking? (I suppose this is why conventional wisdom suggests that starting a conversation by asking someone what they do is one way to have the conversation quickly stall out.)

I work in higher education. I'm a library worker, who holds a degree in library and information science, with a job as a full-time librarian. I'm a government information librarian, except when I'm a data services librarian (except when these two are the same role). I help people find and use content from governments of all shapes and sizes, and I work with people to access and understand content that can be analyzed with computational approaches. I teach classes and workshops and instruction sessions, and I learn how to do things so that I can go out and teach them. I manage collections of government documents, which are kind of like regular books except they are completely different and also from the government, and I build collections with web content—yes, with websites—yes, I'm building collections of websites. And I serve on committees and participate in projects and chair task forces—which means that yes, I do go to meetings and then write emails.

It's a strange time to be a government information librarian. Our work seems vital, yet in some ways it can also seem remote. Government information is a hot topic, and access and preservation have become mainstream issues, along with authenticity and even authority. Yet libraries and librarians can be slow to shift direction or pick up on possible momentum. For some of us, our day-to-day work has hardly changed at all. As I try to bridge this perceived gap for myself, I want to share my perspective on how we might explore possibilities for change and action.

One of the greatest ways we can contribute within our communities is to be present with our knowledge and expertise, while at the same time being open to new ways of thinking about government information collections and services. Library instruction, open access initiatives, web archiving projects, and digital scholarship programs are all poised to react to changing concerns within our field. There are opportunities to incorporate government information into each of these areas, and sometimes this can happen all once, as DataRescue events (http://www.ppehlab.org/datarescue-events/) have demonstrated throughout the United States.

We can also encourage those who care to take direct action: advocate, speak up, and share stories about how access to government information affects what they care about. Libraries and librarians work for long-term access to government information because the communities we serve rely on it. To the extent that a clear picture of this need can be communicated, it's perhaps what government information librarians are best positioned to do.

This leads me to ask of all of you: what can we do to connect our work, and the work we want to do, with our current roles and responsibilities within libraries and cultural heritage institutions? How can we go from a vision, to a plan and definitive action? I have offered a few of my ideas, and I welcome you to share yours, whether in future issues of *DttP*, in a conference presentation, or even a listserv message. Our professional community is waiting to hear from us, and this is the time for action.

One new line for my professional identity: I am honored to serve as GODORT Chair for the coming year. I want to work with all of our members to continue to transform GODORT into an organization where action happens. In order to do so, we will need to transition from the final stages of GODORT's reorganization into a sustained level of activity for all of our priorities as an organization: learning, discussion, advocacy, and scholarship. There is a role for everyone in this work, and I encourage you to contact me so we can discuss how you can contribute.

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