

Reflections on the RUSA President's Program 2015

It's Complicated: Navigating the Dynamic Landscapes of Digital Literacy, Collapsing Contexts, and Big Data

Cathay Keough

Cathay Keough (cathay.keough@lib.de.us) is Statewide Coordinator, Reference Services, Delaware Division of Libraries, and Executive Director, Delaware Library Association

There comes a time when a researcher speaks to librarians and the aftermath of the articulation echoes for days, maybe even weeks. danah boyd's rapid-paced, information-packed RUSA President's Program presentation at the ALA Annual Conference 2015 in San Francisco resonated around three topics:

- How technology can complicate our understanding of the world and the people around us by presenting information outside of its original context
- How technology can expand the ways in which we understand the world and the people around us by bringing us into contact with ideas, cultures, and contexts that we would otherwise be unaware
- How increased data collection, and issues of classification, storage, and access are creating challenges to personal privacy

Dr. boyd began by sharing her unique educational background. Because she was trained by anthropologists, but also studied computer science, her focus area has been what she calls "the intersection of technology and society." She recounted her love for data, big data, and metadata and offered, "Librarians are the patron saints of information" and "metadata is a love note to the future." As patron saints of information, she warned, librarians must understand the many ways data and information can be used to impinge on our freedom and privacy.

STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING PRIVACY

Dr. boyd offered insight about how young people manage privacy in an online, social world. Her research into teens and their efforts to maintain their privacy began in 2006. Her work in this area culminated with the recent publication of "It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens" (2014, electronically available at www.danah.org/itscomplicated). Through her research, boyd has immersed herself in what she calls networked publics—public areas that are restructured by networked technologies. "Social media is a relief valve," boyd stated, and a place where people can engage to create a new community. Boyd explains that young people "complain about adults being 'in their business' while adults assume that if something is public, they have the right to look." boyd continued with, "Privacy isn't simply the practice of controlling the flow of information. It's about controlling a social situation."

Equally important is the context in which these networked spaces allow the information to be presented, maintained, and reviewed. The online environment creates a fluid way

FROM COMMITTEES OF RUSA

for information to be posted and accessed, and information posted in one space and context, may ultimately be perceived in another space, stripped of its original context. This can be problematic if, for instance, we post information on our Facebook page with the expectation that our audience will understand our tone, the overall context of the comment. But such posts can easily show up in feeds, stripped of context that would help illuminate meaning and intention. boyd refers to this phenomena as “collapsing of context.” She explains that when contexts collapse offline we have mental models that help us understand how and why people act differently in different situations. For instance, we may use a different manner of speech and dress at work than we use with our friends on a Saturday night. The choices we make are appropriate and understood as contextually appropriate by our peers and colleagues. But online, people struggle with finding ways to manage boundaries and control the meaning of contextual choices (i.e., sharing of jokes, tone of voice, etc.) that may be perceived and judged outside of their original context and by those who were not the intended audience.

MAKING MEANING OF MESSY DATA

Dr. boyd shared an interesting example of how young people discovered that by adding a brand name, like “Nike,” into their comment, their post would escalate in algorithmic value and show up more frequently in their friend’s feeds. They learned to manipulate an information system designed to manipulate them and share information in a way that they achieved their desired results. Dr. boyd used this story as a way to point out not only the savvy of teens, but the increasing sophistication of targeted online marketing based on huge amounts of data that have been collected and correlated about us. She shared a well-known (if possibly apocryphal) story about how Target correlated the purchase of fragrance-free wipes and vitamins to accurately assess that a 16 year old customer was pregnant, and they began sending her ads related to pregnancy and newborns.

Similarly, Google, Facebook, and other online services are likely to tune into what we search for, correlate that with other factors such as age, gender, geography, and other demographic data points, and serve up ads and feed items that reflect our own beliefs and worldviews. In this way, the algorithms that determine what we see have the capacity to limit our perception and understanding of the world. “We’ve long known that the mechanisms of information organization have politics,” boyd remarked. “Just because a machine is categorizing information doesn’t mean that it is without politics.”

NETWORKED DATA AND LIBRARIANSHIP IN A DATA ERA

Data is “all about networks,” boyd told us. And there are many questions challenging us to think about networked

information, the very foundation of the question being, “Who controls it?”

Dr. boyd gave a clear example of email, asking, “Who owns the email that you send? The recipient? Those who own the server?” She then moved into the collection of genetic information, asking what does it mean to have donated genetic data? A Supreme Court decision has ruled that collecting genetic material is legal (*Maryland v. King*: www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/12pdf/12-207_d18e.pdf). However, it is important to ask, who is collecting it and what are they doing with it?

Finally, Dr. boyd shifted to a discussion to the very core values of librarianship, which include the following:

- Access
- Intellectual freedom
- Preservation
- Education and lifelong learning
- Democracy
- Social responsibility
- Service
- Professionalism
- The public good
- Diversity
- Confidentiality/privacy

“The public good means a commitment to openness, a commitment to making certain that you fight for people’s ability to access information,” boyd told us. “In order to be an informed society, we cannot let politics get in the way of public access to information.” She acknowledged how difficult this shifting landscape is for literacy and access, and for the world of information. And then she called us to action.

Dr. boyd appealed to our passion and rallied us to continue to fight for access to facts, to ask harder questions, to be active in the political arena. We need new critical ways (and need to employ critical thinking) to make sense of information, and help our communities learn, discover, and understand. She warned that propaganda is becoming more sophisticated, and that librarians are needed to help make sense and meaning of information around us.

Her message ended on a high note; not one that sent an alarm but that called for us to remember who we are and what we can do within the realms of our profession, because the challenges of privacy and surveillance continue to get harder. “What is stopping you from fighting for freedom of access, for freedom of information?” she asked each of us in the room. “I beg you to get engaged in this.”

Dr. danah boyd is a Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research and the founder/president of the Data and Society Research Institute. Read about more of her ideas at www.zephoria.org/thoughts/. The RUSA President’s Program Planning Committee and the RUSA Just Ask Task Force invite you to view the video recording of Dr. boyd’s presentation at ALA Annual 2015, which is available to ALA members at www.ala.org/rusa/rusa-presidents-program-2015.