



Law Library Lights

Editor's Column

Amy Taylor

Emerging Technologies Librarian, American University, Washington College of Law, Pence Law Library, amy.taylor@wcl.american.edu



Happy Spring to Everyone! This issue features a timely column from our president, Pamela Lipscomb, on the joys and importance of volunteering. You may have noticed that the table of contents to your right is rather sparse; we did not receive any feature articles for this issue. If this disappoints you, please consider writing for an upcoming issue.

Also in this issue, Shannon Roddy brings you Member

News, Anne Guha writes a lovely book review of *The Accidental Data Scientist*, and our Tech Columnist, Jill Smith, gives an insightful and thought-provoking piece on the ways we should think about technology. ■

Table of Contents

Editor's Column <i>Amy Taylor</i>	1
President's Column <i>Pamela Lipscomb</i>	2
Member Spotlight <i>Shannon Roddy</i>	5
Book Review <i>Anne Guha</i>	6
Tech Talk <i>Jill Smith</i>	9



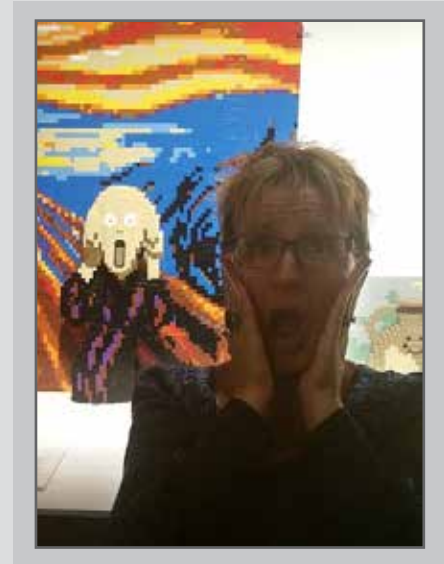
President's Column

The Unexpected Joys of Volunteering for LLSDC

Pamela Lipscomb

Manager of Reference Services, Arent Fox LLP

Lipscomb.pamela@arentfox.com



I joined LLSDC in 2007 straight out of library school. I loved interacting with my fellow librarians in library school, both professors and students. I figured I would attend events and get to know people and just enjoy all the things that the society had to offer. And then, one of my library school pals told me that I was on the Arrangements Committee with her. I could handle that as long as she was the one in charge. I went to a couple of events, I checked people in, and it was great. Then she let me know that she was moving on and it was my committee now. What?! I didn't know what to do or where to start.

The first couple of events were fly by the seat of my pants, but I learned the ropes courtesy of all those fantastically helpful librarians we all know and love. Kate Martin hosted my very first event and I leaned on her greatly as she was once the Arrangements Chair too. The event was for the Opening Reception and we had a Viennese Tea Party. It went off brilliantly, even with the broken glass samovar. I ended up being the Arrangements Chair for the next several years.

Margarett Bartlett then asked me to run the Private Law Libraries SIS with her. I was really worried about the time commitment, but she reassured me that it wasn't that bad and that for the first year, she would be there to help me learn the ropes. She was and she did and I learned more about putting together educational lunch programs than I ever imagined! The biggest thing that I learned was that it wasn't that hard – and it wasn't going to be the time and resources burden that I was afraid it would be.



President's Column, Continued

Like most of us, I have work responsibilities and a family at home with all of the meetings, games, dinners, cleaning, and crazy commitments that come with living in the DC Metro area. I'm very lucky to have a spouse who is a volunteer addict like me. (Don't ask me how many committees I am on and organizations I support.) He supports my efforts to give back to the community that has given me so much. I'm also lucky because I have been around long enough now to know what new volunteers don't – that great unknown of COMMITMENT that we all fear to make and then realize we can't fulfill. And I am here to tell you, it is not as bad or scary as you think.

We are always looking for people to help run committees. In a perfect world, we would have two or three people to share the load. We are an incredibly lucky group (560 strong at last count) to be in close proximity to one another and be able to hold regular and amazing programs. Many of our committees hold five or six programs from September through May. Organizing and pulling off a great lunch program is as simple as coming up with an idea (what do you want to learn?), finding a host (asking around), setting a date (just checking the calendar online), advertising (listserv, calendar, newsletter), collecting rsvps, and being there on the day of to welcome everyone and lead the discussion. Adding a speaker (vendor or colleague) often makes it easier because you can turn it over after introductions. It seems so daunting, but after one or two, you find that getting your kids off to school is more difficult.

If you have other committee members, then five or six events becomes a lot easier to manage. The best part of the deal is when you find yourself overwhelmed or struggling for ideas, you have a whole team of librarians in the organization willing to back you up. I have gotten many of my programming ideas simply from sitting around and talking to my colleagues. If something happens and you can only do two or three meetings, you won't be letting anyone down. There are always multiple events every month for LLSDC members to attend. All it takes is for one attendee to tell you just how much they loved and appreciated your event to make it all worth it and give you the creative jolt to start planning the next one.

Running for election to the Executive Board can be the ultimate terrifying thought. I know it was for me. When I was first approached, I shook my head hard and told the person who asked that I didn't want to be in charge of making decisions for everyone else. I then started listing all of the things I had going on in my life. I couldn't possibly commit to another thing. She let me off that year, but was right back at me the next. I caved and told her that I would run, but don't put me in a leadership position or in charge of money (I married an accountant for a very good reason). She nominated me for Recording Secretary and wait, what? I won? Now what? Thankfully, every year, the board has a "pass the



President's Column, Continued

baton" meeting in which the person currently holding the job passes along the job requirements and their personal advice. Bill Grady, my predecessor, gave me a folder with a type-written to do list that I referred to regularly. It took me a month or two to get settled in and comfortable, but then it became part of my routine.

Board meetings are once a month and rotate between the locations of the various board members. We send out an agenda a day or two before and it guides what we discuss. We talk about what happened the month before in the various committees and what they have coming up. We read and approve membership and treasurer's reports and the last month's minutes. We discuss any issues that may have come down from AALL or anything brought to us by our members. Some board members may have more to do to prep for the meetings than others, but no job is overwhelming – not even that of the President. At the end of the day, there are ten of us to offer guidance and support to one another.

For me, running for Vice-President/President-Elect came at an important juncture of my career. My boss had just told me he was retiring and I was really nervous about being in charge. At a happy hour with LLSDC colleagues, we were discussing the upcoming election and someone suggested it would be great leadership experience. I went home that night and before I could change my mind, emailed the nominations chair and threw my hat in the ring. I have never regretted it. I have learned so many leadership skills in the past couple of years and have gained tremendous confidence at work because of it.

Volunteering for LLSDC has given me much more than I have given to the Society. I know so many of you much better than I would have just by attending events as I am not a natural mingler (no, really). I have learned how to organize huge parties and plan small lunches. I can troubleshoot membership issues and offer my input on what give-aways we have at the AALL annual meeting. Volunteering for LLSDC has given me a way to be creative and thoughtful, hone my organizational skills, and recently, my writing skills. Most importantly, being a volunteer has allowed me to develop as a leader and made me a stronger librarian.

LLSDC wouldn't be here without its volunteers. Volunteers give of their time, energy and ideas. And LLSDC rewards them back in spades. There are lots of opportunities to volunteer in an all-volunteer organization. Consider it. You won't regret it. volunteer@llsdc.org ■



Member Spotlight

Shannon Roddy

*Student Services Librarian, American University, Washington College of Law
roddy@wcl.american.edu*

Cameron Gowan

Cameron Gowan, Library Services Manager at Jones Day, has been appointed Chair of the AALL Diversity Committee for 2016-2017.

Louis Abramovitz

Louis Abramovitz joined Hogan Lovells as a member of the Research Analyst team in February.



Shannon Lynch

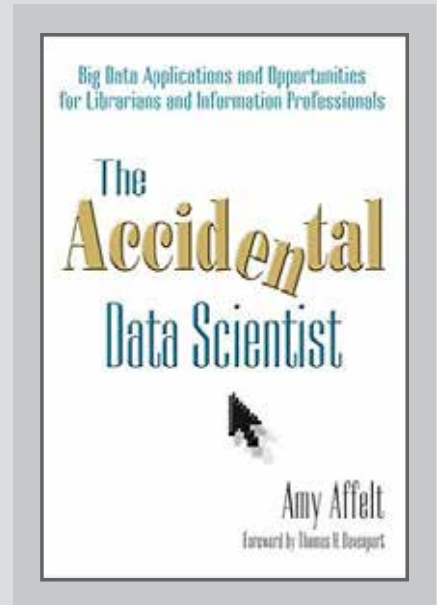
Shannon Lynch recently became the Law Librarian at the U.S. Department of Interior Library. Previously, she was a Research Librarian at Latham & Watkins LLP.

Book Review

Amy L. Affelt, *The Accidental Data Scientist: Big Data Applications and Opportunities for Librarians and Information Professionals* (Medford, N.J.: Information Today, 2015)

Anne Guha

Anne Guha, Reference Librarian, Georgetown Law Library
amg300@law.georgetown.edu



By now, most of us have at least a passing familiarity with the term “Big Data.” We are probably aware that it has been growing in use and importance in recent years, to the point where it has become nearly ubiquitous in much of the business world. We may have heard that demands for skills and services surrounding finding and using this type of data have likewise been growing. Depending on our situation, however, we may not have had much of an opportunity to truly dig in and explore the concept of “Big Data,” learning what it encompasses and what working with it might look like in practical terms. If this sounds like you, the book reviewed in this issue of Lights might meet your needs quite nicely.

It should be said at the outset that, despite the title, Amy Affelt’s *The Accidental Data Scientist* is not a book that will teach readers how to completely re-invent themselves from the ground up as a “data scientist” of the type that might spend her days “writing code and conducting high-level programming” [p. 29]. Instead, the emphasis of the book is on orienting the reader to the world of Big Data and explaining how librarians can harness their traditional LIS skills and apply them to meeting the research and business needs associated with the use and analysis of Big Data. To put it another way, the focus is not on transforming you into a speed-coding Hadoop master, but rather is on earning you a seat at the table when it comes to your organizations’ Big Data initiatives.

The book begins by giving readers an overview of the concept of “Big Data,” presupposing little to no background knowledge. Cautioning that “there are almost as many definitions of Big Data as



Book Review, Continued

there are data points in Big Data initiatives,” Affelt nevertheless does a satisfying job of demystifying the term, drawing on varied sources to help give the reader an idea of how it is used and frequently providing concrete examples that help clarify the concepts introduced. She also provides a useful operational definition of Big Data, contrasting it with the traditional raw data which, she reminds us, “has always been an integral part of the work of librarians and information professionals in all types of professional settings” [p. 14].

Traditional data, she says, is generally “stored in relational databases [...] in traditional formats” and is “viewed in the context of past activities,” whereas Big Data is “often viewed in the context of the *future*” [p. 15, emphasis added]. Big Data “may be tabulated in real time, but it is evaluated after it is quantified, and it is used to make predictions about the future and to help users map out pathways to solve problems and avoid past mistakes” [p. 16]. She describes two major types of Big Data tools: those used to help visualize data, and those that help generate predictive models. It is the predictive modeling use that most likely comes to mind when thinking about Big Data, and it is this use which harbors the most potential for a company looking to cultivate a competitive advantage.

After providing an overview of what “Big Data” is, Affelt moves on to arming her readers with a working knowledge of the vocabulary and tools used to analyze and work with Big Data. “Before we can become indispensable to Big Data teams,” she says, “we need to acquaint

ourselves with the basic terminology and technology that make this industry tick” [p 26]. If you don’t know Hadoop from Splunk, Chapter 2 is where some of the fog is cleared. Affelt also provides several “real world case studies” to help illustrate how these and other tools have been used to accomplish specific tasks. In fact, all throughout the book Affelt does an excellent job of providing frequent concrete examples of the types of Big Data and Big Data initiatives, illustrating the breadth and variety of what we call “Big Data” and showing the myriad uses to which it can be applied in various industries and contexts. (Chapter 5, “Big Data Applications and Initiatives by Industry,” is principally a collection of detailed Big Data case studies.)

The emphasis throughout the remainder of the book is primarily on how librarians and information professionals can leverage their pre-existing skills and knowledge to add value to Big Data projects. Placing an emphasis on a librarian’s critical thinking and analysis skills, Affelt describes potential roles for LIS professionals both in the beginning stages of a project – e.g. helping to locate good data sources and weed out unreliable or poorly-fitting data – as well as towards the later stages after the predictive algorithms have done their work – e.g. by aiding with the framing and communication of the results. She explains, “Data alone has no context.

Librarians are needed to parse out the narratives to uncover the multiple causes and contexts that surround a dataset. Similarly, we are needed to determine which data should



Book Review, Continued

be tracked and used” [p. 125-26]. The “data librarian’s” role, therefore, can be one of support throughout the cycle of a Big Data project, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of data, aiding with the synthesis of data, giving the data “texture,” and helping others to understand the conclusions that can be drawn. This includes helping others to understand the *limitations* of a set of data and its analysis. Affelt writes:

“We pride ourselves on accuracy and relevancy in our work as librarians. We are not very comfortable with making declarative statements and formulating hard and fast rules based on one sample of data. What we bring to the table, then, are the hard questions that need to be asked when correlation and causation are being debated. We are the people who will point out the potential land mines when these correlations are being made” [p. 129].

The functions of the data librarian are therefore much the same as those of a librarian in a more traditional context: finding and evaluating information, assisting with its analysis, and creating knowledge-based deliverables. Affelt provides the reader with some tools for accomplishing these tasks in the “Big Data” arena, such as basic suggestions for how to find data, checklists for evaluating data sources, lists of questions and considerations to use to help bring “context awareness” to data projects, and a framework developed to guide librarians through the major stages of a data-based research project.

Affelt also provides guidance on keeping up-to-date on developments in Big Data and related technologies, and suggests some free, easy tools anyone can use to begin experimenting with Big Data and learning how to work with it. (Although I noticed that many of the citations offered in the book were dated or last visited in 2013 and early 2014, my spot-checks of a few of the blogs and resources mentioned in the book found each still available, giving me confidence that today’s readers will likely still find most of the book’s recommendations relevant and useful.)

If Affelt’s book has a weakness, it may be that it does not provide much in the way of detailed guidance or in-depth instruction on mastering new, concrete “data scientist” skills. As Thomas H. Davenport writes in the forward,

“if you want to go even further into the field of data science, you will probably need to learn more about some of the technologies for big data that Affelt describes, and perhaps even learn to use Hadoop or to program in some of the scripting languages that are often used with it, like Python, Pig, or Hive” [p. xv].

However, if your goal is not to re-define yourself as a “data scientist” but rather to re-frame yourself as a “data librarian,” building on your existing skill set to move in a new direction or potentially create a new role for yourself, this book could be very helpful in getting you on the right track. ■



Tech Talk

What We [Should] Think About When We Think About Technology

Jill Smith

*Instructional Technology Librarian, Georgetown Law Library
jas515@law.georgetown.edu*



A quick thought experiment: what examples of technology exist on your desk right now?

What sprang immediately to mind? A computer? Tablet? Smartphone?

Or did you also think about other items? Your office phone? Your stapler? What about your favorite pen and notebook?

The fact is, every single item named above (and many others) are examples of “technology.” They may not be “high tech” but they’re tech. They are tools designed by humans to aid in completing a task.

Over my years as a technologist, my colleagues have sometimes come to me for generalized “suggestions” – they want “mobile app” suggestions or worse, “technology” suggestions for newsletters or other communications. The problem with these requests is that they are completely divorced from what should be the primary question, “What are you trying to accomplish?” with a secondary question closely following, “How are you looking to accomplish it?” and the third question, “What tools do you have at your disposal?”

Basically, asking for an “app suggestion” without further context is like asking a librarian for a “book suggestion.” You can certainly start handing the patron volumes, but without knowing what their



Tech Talk, Continued

information need is, you can't really fulfill the underlying request. Maybe they don't want a book at all. They just haven't thought deeply yet about what it is that they do want.

So how do we think about technology? Or how *should* we think about technology? As I noted in a Lights article some years before,* you can start by treating the challenge as you would a reference interview. Instead of addressing the request at face value, address what the actual underlying need is.

First question:

"What are you trying to accomplish?"

You want to write a scholarly article? You need (among other things) writing technology, which varies wildly. Dickens wrote his incredibly long novels by hand, with a pen. I wrote my law school thesis the same way (though with a ballpoint, a much more "high-tech" pen to be sure). Some people really draft better with a pen in their hands.

Second question:

"How are you looking to accomplish it?"

Well, if you're like me, you're a far faster typist

than hand-writer. So perhaps speed is desirable. The ability to turn out an electronic document for submission is also needed. That turns our thoughts to the word processor.

Third question:

"What tools do you have at your disposal?"

You do know you have more options than just Microsoft Word, right? You might not have Word and want to try Google Docs, Open Office, or Scrivener as alternatives, depending on your other "how" answers. You might want to use Zotero/Juris-M to help you organize your research and create footnotes.

In conclusion, rather than thinking about "technology" as a thing to be tried because it's there, or a way of "staying current," think about the problems that you and your organization are trying to solve. If it works the way you want it to, you're not doing it wrong just because it isn't "high tech." ■

* http://www.lisdc.org/assets/LLL/54/lights_54-3.pdf, page 12



LLSDC Law Librarians' Society of Washington, D.C.

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202/857-6269
lipscomb.pamela@arentfox.com

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Shannon Roddy

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Arrangements

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apappas@kpmg.com

Bylaws Revisions

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Franklin Square Focus Group

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slarson@bdlaw.com

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kgabel@stewartlaw.com

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202/662-9073
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Law Library Lights

Amy Taylor
202/274-4324
amy.taylor@wcl.american.edu

Law Library Managers' Group

Ann Green
202/408-4706
ann.green@hugheshubbard.com

Membership

Emily Carr
202/707-3790
ecarr@loc.gov

Mentoring

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202/533-4943
apappas@kpmg.com

Nominations

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202/639-6012
smellin@jenner.com

Placement

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sobol@law.edu

Public Relations

Louis Abramovitz
202/383-3420
labramovitz@wbkllaw.com

Scholarships & Grants

Edward O'Rourke
202/637-7967
edward.orourke@bakerbotts.com

Website

Pamela Lipscomb
202/857-6269
lipscomb.pamela@arentfox.com

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ilee@law.gwu.edu

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202/344-4534
ajaffee@venable.com

LAW LIBRARY LIGHTS

Editor

Amy Taylor
202/274-4324
amy.taylor@wcl.american.edu

Assistant Editor

Shannon Roddy
202/274-4332
roddy@wcl.american.edu

Book Review

Anne Guha
202/662-9180
amg300@law.georgetown.edu

Tech Talk

Jill Smith
202/662-9165
jas515@law.georgetown.edu

Member News

Shannon Roddy
202/274-4332
roddy@wcl.american.edu

Publisher/Graphic Designer

Catherine Walter
847/708-4047
cswalter@gmail.com

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