

# Beyond Neutrality : Questioning Professional Ethics, Neoliberalism, and Data Violence in LIS Praxis

Ariel Hahn  
Spring 2018

---

Written for my final core class in the program, *Values and Communities* taught by Professor Ramesh Srinivasan, this essay explores whether or not LIS professionals are responsible for the harm caused by new technologies like surveillance and predictive policing. I advocate, like many scholars before me, that the language of neutrality found throughout our field's professional organizations is problematic and engenders things like data violence through a lack of critical professional ethics.

Categorizing systems of information depends upon, first, the acknowledgement of a pre-existing structure of knowledge. These pre-existing structures are not immune to the biases or dominant voice of society, they are, rather, a product of them. Any knowledge system or collection of information that one may encounter is deeply entrenched in the world that created it, however ethical or unethical it may be. With this framework in mind, what then, is the responsibility of those working in library and information science (LIS) to acknowledge the harm that our systems, datasets, and collections can cause? The work that we do – identifying, naming, cataloging, archiving, quantifying – plays a significant role in how pre-existing structures of knowledge *and* oppression become either further reified or challenged. Unfortunately, so much of our work within this ever-professionalized field is often in alignment with the status quo; our institutions and organizations embrace neutrality instead of overt advocacy and activism. Right now, the field appears to be in a particular moment of crisis where our technological actions have increasingly grave consequences in the non-digital, external world. Evident in the data-driven realms of predictive policing, for example, various forms of data violence have become an unavoidable reality that must be recognized and ameliorated. Therefore, by questioning neutrality, the ethical foundations of LIS, and the ideological impact of global neoliberalism; I argue that information workers are actively perpetuating harm against the very communities they see themselves supporting.

Pulling apart the ethical foundations of the field, then, is a necessary first step to locate the ways in which professional LIS organizations view social responsibility and

neutrality. Organizations like the American Library Association (ALA), Society of American Archivists (SAA), and ASIS&T (Association for Information Science and Technology) each set the professional standards, values, and missions of their respective specialization within LIS. The values explicitly or implicitly encouraged through these organizations have a definitive impact on what is expected of workers in these professions as well as what is expected of the graduate programs that support them. Though many practicing archivists, librarians, and information scientists do not align their individual moral compasses up with what ALA, SAA, or ASIS&T encourage, the influence of these tenets across the field is, regardless, incredibly palpable.

ALA begins their values statement by asserting that, “the foundation of modern librarianship rests on an essential set of core values that define, inform, and guide our professional practice.”<sup>1</sup> It continues through identifying access, confidentiality/privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, the public good, preservation, professionalism, service and social responsibility as guideposts for an ethical practice. Superficially, these all appear to be strong *external* values that recognize the importance of librarianship in our society and how librarians can support their patrons in a multitude of critical ways. However, upon closer examination, ALA’s outlined values only marginally look inward at librarianship as a practice that is performed and, thus, has internal responsibilities or values as well as external ones. Under “Social Responsibility,” ALA, rather lukewarmly, states that the organization should be willing to “take a position on current critical issues”<sup>2</sup> so long as they relate to

---

<sup>1</sup> ALA Council, “Core Values of Librarianship,” American Library Association, adopted June 24, 2009, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>.

<sup>2</sup> ALA Council, 2009.

the library. With “Professionalism,” ALA confirms that, to the organization, library personnel are only deemed professionally qualified if they have an appropriate graduate degree. Quite obviously, higher education does not inherently provide soon-to-be practitioners with some sort of transferrable ethical foundation nor does it demonstrate an individual’s capacity to do good work or be successful as a librarian. This inclusion is a confusing but, simultaneously, very telling aspect of the field’s moral code.

Librarianship as a profession and librarians as individuals appear to be deeply concerned with maintaining the cultural cache the library has gained as a bastion of “good” ethics. Baharak Yousefi critically untangles this issue by arguing that, “perhaps this understanding of ourselves as ‘being on the right side,’ institutionally and professionally, allows some of us to dismiss the need or urgency for personal action. But it is important to probe and problematize our progressive professional rhetoric by looking at what we actually do.”<sup>3</sup> She continues, arguing that, “while the concept of ‘neutrality’ was and is still sometimes being used to maintain and perpetuate the status quo, the tactics have been changing. In my experience, we often relied on the language of neutrality to explain and justify our decisions.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout the essay, “On the Disparity Between What We Say and What We Do in Libraries,” Yousefi skillfully questions the moral code of librarianship, assumptions of neutrality, and the various ways in which challenging those systems can have actual, though never entirely

---

<sup>3</sup> Baharak Yousefi, “On the Disparity Between What We Say and What We Do in Libraries,” in *Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership*, (New York: Litwin Books and Library Juice Press, 2017), 95.

<sup>4</sup> Yousefi, 95.

faultless, impact. Her work provides a powerful frame with which to view questions of ethics, neoliberalism, and responsibility within LIS. If we are to push the field and ourselves as practitioners beyond this current place of quasi-neutrality, then we must look inward at how we work and what issues we see as necessary or possible for fighting within the space of the library.

Similar to ALA, SAA outlines access and use, accountability, advocacy, diversity, history and memory, preservation, professionalism, responsible custody, selection, service, and social responsibility in their "Core Values Statement." Their "Code of Ethics," then, supports professional relationships, judgement, authenticity, security and protection, access and use, privacy, and trust. Under "Social Responsibility," SAA calls upon members to recognize "their responsibility to a variety of groups in society and to the public good."<sup>5</sup> The hierarchy of responsibility, however, begins with archivists needing to "serve the needs and interests of their employers and institutions"<sup>6</sup> first. Rather than encourage the field to see themselves as responsible to the co-creators represented within institutional documents or those that they may be harmed by the material contained in the records; archivists are compelled, by their professional organization, to serve their employer above all others. Again, like ALA, SAA also argues for professionalism, though SAA does not explicitly assert the need of graduate education to be recognized as a qualified member of the field. This phrasing may seem like a radical choice on the part of SAA, but I, unfortunately, do not believe that a post-higher education politic is the reason for the difference. Unlike librarians,

---

<sup>5</sup> Society of American Archivists, "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," last revised January 2012, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

<sup>6</sup> Society of American Archivists, 2012.

practicing archivists have only recently been formally trained in institutions of higher education as such. I believe that in due time SAA will update their values to acknowledge graduate degrees as a new marker of validity within the field to justify the rise of graduate-level archival education.

Further, within their "Diversity" statement, SAA encourages archivists to seek out underrepresented community members as a possible solution for diversifying collections. "They seek to build connections to under-documented communities to support: acquisition and preservation of sources relating to these communities' activities, encouragement of community members' use of archival research sources, and/or formation of community-based archives." The conclusion of the above excerpt is unsettling. SAA suggests that "Archivists" should encourage underrepresented community members<sup>7</sup> to use archival sources and/or form their own community-based archives as though any working archivist or member of SAA could not, themselves, be from an underrepresented community. Likewise, the statement frames community-based archives as something outside of traditional archival praxis rather than something that is very much part of the field's present and future. These statements, instead, act as a continuation of a sort of us/them dichotomy. It does not feel like an actual call for representative diversity within the field or acknowledgement of the individuals already present who occupy both roles. Further, this "Diversity" statement fails to name cultural, ethnic, racial, or linguistic diversity, for example, as additional important ways with which to reach "a diversified and representative

---

<sup>7</sup> Though not explicitly outlined, we can gather from the historic role of archives and archival collection in the world that SAA identifies the "under-documented" as people of color, religious minorities, LGBTQ individuals, indigenous communities, working class or low-income communities, and women.

membership in the profession.”<sup>8</sup> Entirely identical to their librarian peers, SAA fails to be explicitly self-reflexive in how they project ethics and values for the profession. There is very little acknowledgement of an archivist’s responsibility to see their work as that, work that both evolves and is shaped by one’s specific understanding of and experience within the world.

ASIS&T, then, provides the technologically-driven ethical foundation for LIS as a field. The organization identifies as “the only professional association that bridges the gap between information science practice and research... leading the search for new and better theories, techniques, and technologies to improve access to information.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike ALA and SAA, ASIS&T’s professional guidelines are relatively clear, stating that the organization, “urges its members to be ever aware of the social, economic, cultural, and political impacts of their actions or inaction.”<sup>10</sup> That said, ASIS&T, in having the briefest professional guidelines/ethical code, only identifies three responsibilities that members should keep in mind throughout the course of their work. They are responsible to their employers/clients/system users, the profession, and the association. This structure of responsibility is interesting, though not surprising, in that two of the three categories represented above are the profession itself and the professional organization that supports it. Under “Association,” ASIS&T asks that members, “resist procedures that promote unlawful discriminatory practices in access

---

<sup>8</sup> Society of American Archivists, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Association for Information Science and Technology, “About ASIS&T,” Association for Information Science and Technology, accessed June 1, 2018, <https://www.asist.org/about/>.

<sup>10</sup> Association for Information Science and Technology, “ASIS&T Professional Guidelines,” Association for Information Science and Technology, accessed June 2018, <https://www.asist.org/about/asist-professional-guidelines/>.

to and provision of information, by seeking to extend public awareness and appreciation of information availability and provision as well as the role of information professionals in providing such information.”<sup>11</sup> Though this statement is radical in its message, I’m unsure whether or not many of the practitioners within the field will see it as such because, like ALA and SAA, there is still a lack of self-reflexivity throughout the entirety of the guidelines. An additional omission of internal reflection is evident in how ASIS&T limits their responsibilities to direct stakeholders. It does not recognize, as an issue relevant to all of its members, that society now occupies a dangerous cultural moment wherein our information technology impacts individuals outside the systems in question, like those represented in the datasets we use to build or test new technologies.

With the ethical foundations of LIS relatively exposed, I will now frame the political environment that unites each of these specializations as well as their professional associations: neoliberalism. “Neoliberalism is... a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”<sup>12</sup> You cannot examine professional organizations that simultaneously emphasize and obfuscate the individual, nor can you examine the professions they are connected to without looking at the role that neoliberalism has played in their evolution. In his groundbreaking work, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey suggests that,

---

<sup>11</sup> Association for Information Science and Technology, “ASIS&T Professional Guidelines,” 2018.

<sup>12</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.



“we can, therefore, interpret neoliberalization either as a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites.”<sup>13</sup> Each of the above organizations – ALA, SAA, and ASIS&T – encourage their LIS members to see and serve the profession as well as their employers, with only marginal attention given to the world outside that inner sanctum. The individual is repeatedly emboldened to see the value of the work that they do as something exemplary. Rather than focus on economic capital, each organization, though ALA and SAA most significantly, use a kind of pseudo-ethical capital as an additional form of exchange for workers.

LIS does not function as a tool of neoliberalism in the same way that, for example, Wall Street or global real estate markets do. However, there are countless ways in which these fields perpetuate neoliberalism via mass corporatization through corporate sponsorships, supporting private property through attention to intellectual property laws, and placing an internal cultural emphasis on professional autonomy. At the same time, archives and libraries are also *victims* to the powerful wave of neoliberalism via funding cuts, the outsourcing of projects, a focus on metrics as a demonstration of value, as well as the elimination of employee benefits and rise of contract labor. Technology and innovation becomes highlighted in the neoliberal state so many libraries and archives are only able to secure outside funding via fellowships and grants if there is some sort of “smart” component to their project – mass

---

<sup>13</sup> Harvey, 19.

digitization efforts, digital library infrastructure, new computer systems, makerlabs, technology-centric collection development, etc. In the realm of neoliberalism, individual freedoms are championed as increased access to the globalized, free market where competition breeds innovation and success is believed to trickle down to even the least advantaged among us. Numerous archives and libraries have been on the forefront of this technological wave and have found critical, beneficial ways to incorporate more of the digital into their historically analog realms. This kind of work is both necessary and useful. Technology in LIS can be viewed as a complex dualism – where new digital elements can, on one end, bring increased access and literacy to patrons and, on the other end, further individualize or datafy the patron or community member in a way that threatens their privacy and safety.

Neoliberalism beyond the library and archive can be seen even more dramatically in the data-driven world of information science, which, for those in LIS is covered under the umbrella of ASIS&T. Here, privatization is seen as an unquestioned absolute. The model of success in Big Tech and Silicon Valley is a model of neoliberal corporatization where the few provide for the many. There is very little emphasis on creating actual community networks unless that community has the capacity to bring profit to its connector. So often, value within technology as an industry is purely financial – and purely financial for only the highest echelon of members. Individual autonomy, increased efficiency, and quantifiability become the tenets of how any organization, private or public, should be managed in the neoliberal era. The value statements of ALA, SAA, and ASIS&T feature very specific language surrounding

professionalism and, overall, encourage members to be invested in the professional organization itself. This standpoint is a neoliberal result; the organization sees its future wrapped up in the practitioners of the field and, rather than project values that matter without question to said practitioners, the organization is explicit in its call for support. They almost suggest that, “you exist because we exist” as a way to place their significance in the field above the day-to-day praxis. Under these conditions, the affective experience of a system, program, or space matters less than a company’s ability to know how long your experience was, what you did during that experience, and how your time in that world could predict future actions.

From neoliberalism, we can better understand the rise of unethical, yet seemingly efficient systems and how that rise is deeply entrenched in an economic market obsessed with “new” innovation. Neoliberalism has created a financial, ethical, and political market that makes the desire to quantify anything and everything profitable. This exact environment has fostered the evolution of contemporary data violence. Data violence, a term coined by theorist Anna Lauren Hoffman, “occurs as the result of choices that implicitly and explicitly lead to harmful or even fatal outcomes.”<sup>14</sup> These choices “are built on assumptions and prejudices about people, intimately weaving them into processes and results that reinforce biases and, worse, make them seem natural or given.”<sup>15</sup> Micro and macro, data violence is a form of, most often, racialized harm that is caused on a daily basis at every corner of the tech

---

<sup>14</sup> Anna Lauren Hoffman, “Data Violence and How Bad Engineering Choices Can Damage Society,” *Medium*, April 30, 2018, <https://medium.com/s/story/data-violence-and-how-bad-engineering-choices-can-damage-society-39e44150e1d4>.

<sup>15</sup> Hoffman, 2018.

industry. Hoffman's "Data Violence and How Bad Engineering Choices Can Damage Society," incorporates numerous powerful examples of this phenomenon. Everything from transphobic body-scanners at airports internationally to a racist Google algorithm that identified photographs of Black people as gorillas, data violence weaponizes bias and oppression, two things that are far from new to U.S. society, with the unprecedented power of digital technology.

Like so many other information systems of the past, the power of individual data is not limited to the direct environment that controls or created it. It should go without question that data is not limited to our computer screens, smartphones, or tablets. As human existence becomes increasingly datafied, whether you are directly connected to the digital network or not, there is almost no way to avoid being captured and logged. It lives beyond us, increasingly, without our knowledge. This development means that, without creating a space for informed consent, technology companies are profiting off data based on the everydayness of human existence. If data collection is constant and deeply entrenched in the biases (recognized or subconscious) of those collecting it, then what kinds of systems are we creating and how does their impact flow back to the originator of the data?

Hoffman argues that, "neither distributional nor representative forms of harm can survive without a cultural backdrop that enables them. Pernicious racist or ethnocentric ideas ... perpetuate violence by justifying extant inequalities, supporting destructive policy or rationalizing physical harm."<sup>16</sup> Since the majority of U.S. society is

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

deeply caught up in racist, xenophobic, sexist, transphobic, and homophobic understandings of the world, then so are the systems we create. Hoffman continues saying that this, “is the crime we commit when, as researchers and engineers and data scientists, we fail to think not only about the consequences of our work, but also our assumptions, our categories, and our position relative to the subjects of the data we work with.”<sup>17</sup> Forms of data violence perpetuate because the people behind the algorithms, facial recognition software, datasets, initial artificial intelligence programming, and interface architecture inject their own biases into them.

In addition to Hoffman’s work on data violence, scholars Safiya Umoja Noble and Cathy O’Neil both question the role that algorithms play in reproducing oppression beyond the realm of the computer screen. O’Neil, in *Weapons of Math Destruction*, demonstrates how opaque and biased algorithms have the power to prevent people from gaining access to critical things like employment or receiving bank loans.<sup>18</sup> In *Algorithms of Oppression*, Noble demonstrates how the data violence of racist algorithms has the power to cause actual physical violence as well as extreme psychological damage and financial inequity. Using the radicalization of white supremacist and mass murderer Dylan Roof, Noble details his fateful Google search of “black-on-white-crime” and a subsequent spiral deep into white supremacist fallacies perpetuated online. She demonstrates how, after being provided with misinformation and increasingly toxic content by Google’s secret algorithm, Roof justified his decision to murder nine African-Americans at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*, (New York: Random House, 2016).

in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015.<sup>19</sup> As an active scholar in the IS field, Noble's recent work is a significant example of why issues of data violence need to matter to all members of the LIS field.

Another powerful demonstration of data violence can be found in the relatively recent rise of predictive policing. Seen as an innovated tech solution to a "civic issue" by governments, police departments, and the private sector, predictive policing has become one of the most damaging realities to come out of society's desire to fix the world through artificial intelligence (AI). PredPol is considered one of the most recognizable predictive policing start-ups, which "aims to reduce victimization and keep communities safer."<sup>20</sup> Using a combination of pre-existing crime statistics and new information, PredPol "identifies where and when crime is most likely to occur" thereby enabling police departments "to effectively allocate... resources and prevent crime."<sup>21</sup> From the outside, predictive policing could appear, to an individual in favor of traditional policing, as a way to save tax dollars, punish criminals, and protect private property. Taking into consideration the biases that are inherent to data collection and infused in how algorithms and machine learning are initiated, the high fallibility of these critical datasets, and thus predictive policing decisions, becomes clear. Despite arguing that their machine-learning algorithm never uses any personally identifiable information

---

<sup>19</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> PredPol, "About PredPol," PredPol, last updated 2018, <http://www.predpol.com/about/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

or demographic, ethnic, or socio-economic information, I find it hard to imagine that an algorithm that teaches itself overtime will forever ignore these kinds of data-points.<sup>22</sup>

In a 2016 article for *Slate*, Logan Koepke questioned the ethics of predictive policing, pulling from academic research about the dangers of algorithms based on historic drug crime data, and argued that, “if the underlying historical crime data is biased in a statistical sense—meaning that the data doesn’t actually perfectly reflect reality, and certain things are overrepresented or underrepresented in the sample relative to the actual population—it’s fair to infer that the forecasts made on that data will, in turn, also be statistically biased.”<sup>23</sup> With predictive policing systems like PredPol being offered to police departments around the country, we can see how these algorithms and the actions that result from them could have serious consequences, especially considering that many of the “crime hotspots” identified by these programs are often within low-income, communities of color.

Recent research from PredPol has highlighted the company’s lack of introspection about the potential harm that can and, ultimately, will come from their system. Early in 2018, a team of researchers associated with PredPol, including co-founder and UCLA anthropologist Jeff Brantingham, presented a new study about the use of machine-learning algorithms for predicting gang violence using only partially completed police reports. Rather than incorporating the nuanced full-text narrative description of a crime, the neural network in question generated new text that then is

---

<sup>22</sup> PredPol, “How Predictive Policing Works,” PredPol, last updated 2018, <http://www.predpol.com/how-predictive-policing-works/>.

<sup>23</sup> Logan Koepke, “Predictive Policing Isn’t About the Future. It’s About the Past,” *Slate*, Nov. 21, 2016, [https://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future\\_tense/2016/11/predictive\\_policing\\_is\\_too\\_dependent\\_on\\_historical\\_data.html](https://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2016/11/predictive_policing_is_too_dependent_on_historical_data.html).

turned into a mathematical vector used to make the crime prediction.<sup>24</sup> Critics like journalists Ali Winston and Ingrid Burrington of *The Verge* astutely observed that, “this new line of research suggests that Brantingham has not taken critiques of his research methodology to heart and is pressing forward with a project that is founded on incomplete data, dubious methods, and a premise that, if applied in the field, could result in more people of color behind bars.”<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, the work of PredPol and Jeff Brantingham has, largely, been funded by the U.S. Department of Defense,<sup>26</sup> demonstrating a connection between the federal government and the increased surveillance of communities of color in cities like Los Angeles, where PredPol is active.

Another recent project at the intersection of big data, surveillance, and policing, is that of Palantir. A brainchild of Silicon Valley tycoon Peter Thiel and others, Palantir – like PredPol – found early funding through the U.S. Government, specifically from the CIA’s venture capital firm In-Q-Tel (IQT). Palantir is a data-mining company that has provided data analysis and integration for the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), New York Police Department (NYPD), and New Orleans Police Department (NOPD).<sup>27</sup> Unlike PredPol’s use of non-individualized information, Palantir’s work in New Orleans pulls directly from individual criminal and non-criminal records (social media, probation

---

<sup>24</sup> Ali Winston and Ingrid Burrington, “A pioneer in predictive policing is starting a troubling new project: Pentagon-funded research aims to predict when crimes are gang-related,” *The Verge*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/26/17285058/predictive-policing-predpol-pentagon-ai-racial-bias>.

<sup>25</sup> Winston and Burrington, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> This information is freely available to the broader public. There are mentions of Brantingham’s Pentagon contract in the Winston and Burrington *Verge* article, as well as in other recent publications about PredPol.

<sup>27</sup> Ali Winston, “Palantir has secretly been using New Orleans to test its predictive policing technology: Palantir deployed a predictive policing system in New Orleans that even city council members don’t know about,” *The Verge*, Feb. 27, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/27/17054740/palantir-predictive-policing-tool-new-orleans-nopd>.



and parole information, jail phone-calls, the city's central case management system, etc.) to create a list of potential perpetrators and victims of crimes.<sup>28</sup> Potential offenders are then targeted with the city's CeaseFire program wherein police officers threaten interested parties with maximum sentencing if they reoffend and then connect said citizens with services like job training.<sup>29</sup> Between the gross privacy violations committed as a result of Palantir's intensive data mining and the questionable ethics of the NOPD's secrecy surrounding the program, the necessity of such a new technology becomes difficult to parse out. With both PredPol and Palantir, the question of *why* must be asked. Without diving too deep into the history of policing in the U.S., why does predictive policing seem like a solution for making communities "safer"? Why aren't the data scientists at the helm questioning their own biases or the potential negative impact of their systems? And, possibly most significantly in conversations about our tech-obsessed society, why has the answer to our ills of late been to collect more data?

Adding another voice to the chorus against data violence, Kate Crawford argues that these systems risk

perpetuating an already vicious cycle, in which the police increase their presence in the same places they are already policing (or overpolicing), thus ensuring that more arrests come from those areas. In the United States, this could result in more surveillance in traditionally poorer, nonwhite neighborhoods, while wealthy, whiter neighborhoods are scrutinized even less. Predictive programs are only as good as the data they are trained on, and that data has a complex history.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Winston, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Kate Crawford, "Artificial Intelligence's White Guy Problem," *New York Times*, June 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/opinion/sunday/artificial-intelligences-white-guy-problem.html>.

As expressed earlier in this essay, there appears to be a problem with self-reflexivity and introspection in the fields of LIS, which extends to the work of data scientists and the engineers they often collaborate with. This lack of awareness to the needs of society beyond the desires of the individual worker – be they a librarian, archivist, engineer, data manager, or otherwise – needs to be addressed to create information systems that are more equitable and less likely to cause harm and violence. Seeking a solution is especially pertinent as those victim to harm in these scenarios are already marginalized and oppressed under a neoliberal state. Crawford continues her above argument by highlighting the lack of diversity in the artificial intelligence industry, what she identifies as AI's white guy problem. "Like all technologies before it, artificial intelligence will reflect the values of its creators. So inclusivity matters — from who designs it to who sits on the company boards and which ethical perspectives are included. Otherwise, we risk constructing machine intelligence that mirrors a narrow and privileged vision of society, with its old, familiar biases and stereotypes."<sup>31</sup> The same can be said for the entirety of LIS. There needs to be an active push to critically engage with who is represented and supported in the field as well as who is silenced or tokenized.

To reach a more equitable and representative future that challenges ethical violations like the data violence of racist algorithms or the evolving institutions of predictive policing, LIS needs to see that it, like AI, has a problem with whiteness and, by proxy, is influenced by their own culture of white supremacy. This problematic status

---

<sup>31</sup> Crawford, 2016.

extends to the construction of these fields in terms of the people that make up the workforce, the actual physical spaces each institution occupies and the ways in which those spaces either work towards upholding or dismantling oppression, the actual collections inside each institution, the construction of the very knowledge systems or datasets used, the oppressive structures that are reinforced through professional organizations and workplace culture, as well as how white supremacy and other forms of oppression are rampant in LIS education. The specific historic context of each these institutions provides powerful explanations surrounding their current political (or neutral?) instantiations. nina de jesus in "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression," traces the history of the liberal library with rise of the enlightenment and connects those ideals to the genocide of indigenous people within the U.S., identifying that the library perpetuates settler states and is thereby complicit in institutionalizing oppression.<sup>32</sup> de jesus further critiques the library by highlighting additional ways in which it upholds white supremacy, arguing that "libraries are another institution necessary for maintaining a system of intellectual property within a larger context of white supremacy that depends on the inherent enslaveability of Black people."<sup>33</sup> Her argument is nuanced and thoughtful, painting a complex and less positive picture of library history than what is so often outwardly projected.

Beyond the institutional history, there are also significant labor-based ways in which LIS, and here libraries specifically, reflect and reinforce white supremacy. Teresa

---

<sup>32</sup> nina de jesus, "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, Sept. 24, 2014, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-the-library-in-institutional-oppression/>.

<sup>33</sup> de jesus, 2014.

Y. Neely and Lorna Peterson's 2007 paper, "Achieving racial and ethnic diversity among academic and research librarians," examines the lack of recruitment, retainment, *and* advancement of librarians of color. Noting that to improve these conditions, libraries and library graduate programs need to do intentional things like "institute a system of accountability regarding the retention and advancement of underrepresented groups in libraries," create opportunities for mentorship, as well as foster opportunities for professional development.<sup>34</sup> In the more than ten years since Neely and Peterson's paper was first published, librarianship is still overwhelming white – with 86.7% of respondents in recent ALA study identifying as such.<sup>35</sup> Despite these glaring statistics, both libraries and library graduate programs are failing to do the appropriate work necessary to create spaces that are both safe and supportive for diverse students, especially students of color. Each of these institutions are many years away from reaching a more equitable reality but, to get there, both libraries and library schools need to fully acknowledge the problem.

In addition to confronting the lack of diversity within the field and finding dedicated ways to improve it, we can look to how the professional organizations of LIS can serve to be more than tools of neoliberalism and, instead, act as foundations for progressive action. Though the public guidelines for all members of ASIS&T are intentionally framed to be palatable to as many members as possible, considering the

---

<sup>34</sup> Teresa Y. Neely and Lorna Peterson, "Achieving racial and ethnic diversity among academic and research librarians The recruitment, retention, and advancement of librarians of color— A white paper," *C&RL News*, October 2007, 565.

<sup>35</sup> Kathy Rose and Kelsey Kenke, "2017 ALA Demographic Study," American Library Association Office of Research and Statistics, January 11, 2017, <http://www.ala.org/tools/sites/ala.org.tools/files/content/Draft%20of%20Member%20Demographics%20Survey%2001-11-2017.pdf>.

various ways in which specific arms of the association are doing critical work is incredibly important to this conversation. ASIS&T has an active special interest group dedicated to Information Ethics and Policy (SIG/IEP), for example. In "Research Ethics and the Age of Big Data," Chris Allen Sula asks two critical questions of information professionals: one, "how do we, as researchers, approach our work ethically where new data collection and analysis tools are concerned?" and, two, "how do we do ethical research in an age of big data?"<sup>36</sup> The author skillfully pulls from an ethical model for ethnographic fieldwork (PERCS)<sup>37</sup> and applies it to the work that ASIS&T members are actively doing in terms of collecting data. With big data research, Sula questions participant selection, invasiveness, informed consent, privacy/anonymity, exploratory research, algorithmic methods, dissemination channels and participant response, and data publication. Knowing that many of the members of ASIS&T are connected to companies throughout the world of algorithms and artificial intelligence, Sula's call to his peers is powerful. Here, he pushes the field to reflect upon the impact of the work they do and the value that ethical criticism offers them.

Advocating for social justice to be part of LIS work and education has been critically examined in Safiya Umoja Noble and Sarah T. Roberts' essay, "Empowered to Name, Inspired to Act: Social Responsibility and Diversity as Calls to Action in the LIS Context." The two scholars do significant work suggesting the role that faculty members can have in the social justice praxis of their students. "Students must be

---

<sup>36</sup> Chris Alen Sula, "Research Ethics in a Age of Big Data," *Bulletin of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 42, no. 2 (December/January 2016), <https://www.asist.org/files/bulletin/dec-15/Sula.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Program for Ethnographic Research & Community Studies at Elon University: Sula, 18.

given the opportunity to develop their historical understanding of social justice issues; foster their vocabularies and abilities to talk about the complex issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class; and recognize the ways in which issues of power play out in the communities in which they will live and practice.”<sup>38</sup> They continue that beyond directly supporting students, faculty can also create courses with social justice components and make their own activist politics visible. Through such work, in tandem with continued writing about the importance of ethical research as well as more intentional conversations surrounding white supremacy and institutionalized oppression, LIS scholarship may be able to encourage the field’s various professional organizations to look beyond static neutrality.

So, where does all of this research leave us? What will the future of LIS look like? Can there be interventions to reverse the harm done by data violence? Is predictive policing not only an inevitable future for the communities we serve, but their present realities? This brief essay provided a cursory look at the evolution of professional ethics in LIS and connected those values to a larger culture of neoliberalism. Through analyzing data violence, and predictive policing specifically, I expressed a link between our internal climate, the broader political state in which we operate, and how those things impact the work we do. This moment of neoliberalism is not yet over, so further conversations and critical writing must be done to untangle how it impacts LIS and what kinds of things we can do to limit its reach. If we do not pay attention to these conditions, then we are enacting harm upon the very communities we claim to serve

---

<sup>38</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble and Sarah T. Roberts, “Empowered to Name, Inspired to Act: Social Responsibility and Diversity as Calls to Action in the LIS Context,” *Library Trends* 62, no. 3 (2016): 528, doi:10.1353/lib.2016.0008.

and support. Further, predictive policing has only just begun. Many other scholars have recognized this as an ethical crisis that needs to be confronted by information scholars, engineers, technologists, and our government bodies. Future research on this topic should include a deeper historical analysis of white supremacy and its underpinnings in the ethical and institutional foundations of LIS. A closer analysis such as this would allow the connections between historic forms of institutionalized oppression and how that oppression has been reformatted and re-weaponized through predictive policing to be seen even more clearly. Our values shape our field, so I can only hope that radical work against racist neoliberal projects like PredPol and Palantir can continue to occur.

## Bibliography

- ALA Council. "Core Values of Librarianship." American Library Association. Adopted June 24, 2009. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>.
- Association for Information Science and Technology. "About ASIS&T." Association for Information Science and Technology. Accessed June 1, 2018. <https://www.asist.org/about/>.
- Association for Information Science and Technology. "ASIS&T Professional Guidelines." Association for Information Science and Technology. Accessed June 1, 2018. <https://www.asist.org/about/asist-professional-guidelines/>.
- Crawford, Kate. "Artificial Intelligence's White Guy Problem." *New York Times*, June 25, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/opinion/sunday/artificial-intelligences-white-guy-problem.html>.
- de Jesus, Nina. "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, Sept. 24, 2014. <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-the-library-in-institutional-oppression/>.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hoffman, Anna Lauren. "Data Violence and How Bad Engineering Choices Can Damage Society." *Medium*, April 30, 2018. <https://medium.com/s/story/data-violence-and-how-bad-engineering-choices-can-damage-society-39e44150e1d4>.
- Koepke, Logan. "Predictive Policing Isn't About the Future. It's About the Past." *Slate*, Nov. 21, 2016. [https://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future\\_tense/2016/11/predictive\\_policing\\_is\\_too\\_dependent\\_on\\_historical\\_data.html](https://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2016/11/predictive_policing_is_too_dependent_on_historical_data.html).
- Neely, Teresa Y. and Lorna Peterson. "Achieving racial and ethnic diversity among academic and research librarians The recruitment, retention, and advancement of librarians of color – A white paper," *C&RL News*, October 2007.
- Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: NYU Press, 2018.



- Noble, Safiya Umoja and Sarah T. Roberts. "Empowered to Name, Inspired to Act: Social Responsibility and Diversity as Calls to Action in the LIS Context." *Library Trends* 62, no. 3 (2016): 512-532. doi:10.1353/lib.2016.0008.
- O'Neil, Cathy. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. New York: Random House, 2016.
- PredPol. "About PredPol." PredPol. Last updated 2018. <http://www.predpol.com/about/>.
- PredPol. "How Predictive Policing Works." PredPol. Last updated 2018. <http://www.predpol.com/how-predictive-policing-works/>.
- Rose, Kathy and Kelsey Kenke. "2017 ALA Demographic Study." American Library Association Office of Research and Statistics. Last updated January 11, 2017. <http://www.ala.org/tools/sites/ala.org.tools/files/content/Draft%20of%20Member%20Demographics%20Survey%2001-11-2017.pdf>.
- Society of American Archivists. "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics." Society of American Archivists. Last revised January 2012. <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.
- Sula, Chris Alen. "Research Ethics in a Age of Big Data." *Bulletin of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 42, no. 2 (December/January 2016), <https://www.asist.org/files/bulletin/dec-15/Sula.pdf>
- Winston, Ali. "Palantir has secretly been using New Orleans to test its predictive policing technology: Palantir deployed a predictive policing system in New Orleans that even city council members don't know about." *The Verge*, Feb. 27, 2018. <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/27/17054740/palantir-predictive-policing-tool-new-orleans-nopd>.
- Winston, Ali and Ingrid Burrington. "A pioneer in predictive policing is starting a troubling new project: Pentagon-funded research aims to predict when crimes are gang-related." *The Verge*, April 26, 2018. <https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/26/17285058/predictive-policing-predpol-pentagon-ai-racial-bias>.
- Yousefi, Baharak. "On the Disparity Between What We Say and What We Do in Libraries." In *Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership*. New York: Litwin Books and Library Juice Press, 2017.