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Commentary

**Virtual Connections and Virtual Futures:
A Commentary on Attending RDAP2020 Remotely
and a Look to the Future of Online Conferences**

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Abstract

This commentary describes the experience of attending RDAP 2020 remotely after the author's trip cancellation due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. The author describes the highs and lows of the remote viewing experience, and the potential future landscape of virtual conferences and remote attendance. Maintaining networking and casual conversation during a virtual conference is an area that needs improvement but has potential. Takeaways from several conference sessions, including the keynote speaker, are also included along with discussion of how the author learned valuable information or could apply the topics to her own work.

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Disclosures: The author reports no conflict of interest. The substance of this article is based upon the author's experience at RDAP Summit 2020. Additional information at end of article.

Past RDAP Experience and 2020 RDAP Plans

I attended my first RDAP in 2018, and unfortunately missed 2019. I was looking forward to attending again this year when travel restrictions due to COVID-19 led to cancelling my trip the weekend before the conference. I was pleased that during the first few days of new restrictions and travel guidance, RDAP quickly organized a virtual option for those who were unable to travel. While I knew the conference wouldn't be the same, I appreciated that I would still be able to view the speaker sessions remotely. Writing this a few months later, it is now becoming commonplace that conferences and other events will be held virtually. When RDAP 2020 was held the second week of March 2020, it was the very beginning of this change. The innovation the conference organizers showed by quickly arranging for viewing the conference via Zoom indicates their strong support for the organization, the conference, and their members.

I am further into my data librarian career than I was in 2018 at my first RDAP, and I was looking forward to connecting with colleagues I have only met virtually since then, furthering my knowledge and skills, and looking for new ideas to bring back to my institution. In this commentary, I will discuss the experience of remote viewing combined with my takeaways from the conference itself, and reflect further on the experience of attending a conference virtually.

General Thoughts on the Conference and Speakers

The remote session viewing was via Zoom, arranged by one of the planning committee members via their institutional account. Connecting to the Zoom link was easy, and there were committee members from RDAP on the other end working to make sure the remote attendees could see and hear as well as possible. Moderators also kept an eye on the chat, where we could submit questions for the speakers or let them know something wasn't working right. Being able to stay involved beyond just viewing the presentations helped me feel more connected to the conference.

The opening keynote on indigenous data sovereignty by Dr. Michele Suina of Cochiti Pueblo was wonderful. I was immediately happy that the remote attendance option was available and included video, so that I didn't miss this session and that I could see the visuals of Dr. Suina's speech along with her beautiful Indigenous Data Sovereignty Woman superhero costume. Her important talk enabled us to learn about respect for and ways to use indigenous data. I learned that Traditional Pueblo knowledge, in the form of family documents and recording that are held in a repository that controls who has access to the data. The indigenous people question the repository's right to control this data, which leads to a need for tribal-specific data repositories and sharing policies and a need for ongoing conversation. Metadata also needs to reflect this information, and to note if a data set includes indigenous data taken through colonization.

My second big takeaway from Dr. Suina's talk was learning about the CARE principles for Indigenous Data Governance—Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics—as noted by the Global Indigenous Data Alliance and summarized on the organization's website. As a data librarian, I am familiar with the FAIR principles, and this adds another dimension of consideration and thought when working with data. Be FAIR and CARE!

During Panel 2 on Data Visualization, I especially enjoyed Jo Klein, Tess Grynock, and Alisa Rod's presentation on "Connecting Communities through a Passion for Data Visualization in Libraries: The Visualizing the Future Symposia" (Grynock 2020). They presented on their experience at the symposia, but also on their general thoughts about data visualization. This presentation led me to think about how I can potentially collaborate with others and incorporate data visualization as a component of the data services offered at my institution. Data visualization can also support ways of thinking about empirical evidence and information and data literacy. Learning to identify misleading visualizations, and what is accurate enough to be compelling as evidence, are other points that the speakers noted and these would dovetail nicely into the data management and data literacy skills that I teach. Another point they consider is the library as a discipline agnostic space. Since data visualization is relevant to many fields, there is the possibility that the library can own the skills training, perhaps in a modularized nature and offering the potential for instruction geared to various skill levels as needed. This is a concept I would like to explore in my library with other colleagues to combine our skills and expertise, offering a workshop series or collaborating with other departments on campus.

During chat reference sessions, the subject specialist librarians at my institution often get requests for business information and business datasets. This isn't an area I am familiar with, so I found the talk by Kurtis Tanaka of Ithaka S+R on "The Data Disconnect: How Changing Industry Data Sharing Policies Impact Business Research and Pedagogy" interesting and informative. Tanaka noted that it is hard to find public datasets, hard to know what an institution has access to, and that instructors have diverse views on students' ability to discover information. Students' ability to navigate in general in a digital environment does not mean they can find quality information. Knowing this helps me be aware of what hurdles students are facing as they look for business data, and I feel better knowing that many people find it difficult to locate this information.

Two talks from the Data Privacy panel also stood out to me. "Screening for human subject disclosure risk during data curation and RDM service connections" presented by David Fearon of John Hopkins University, was about de-anonymizing data. Most researchers are good at removing direct identifiers, but not quasi-identifiers such as dates or locations, that could link some records to externally available info but might also remove interesting or valuable research variables. I teach a data management basics workshop and this information is useful to consider when talking about aspects of data privacy and de-anonymization.

Remote Viewing Experience and General Takeaways

As noted above, the RDAP team did a wonderful job of getting remote access set up within a matter of days as travel restrictions increased and attendees had to cancel their trips. In-person moderators present at the conference kept remote attendees informed of what was happening, did their best to adjust audio volume and respond to issues, and made sure the speakers were visible on screen. It was not a perfect setup, but it was wonderful to be able to attend virtually rather than miss the entire conference altogether on short notice.

One of the most important parts of any conference is networking and the random conversations that happen during meals, breaks, and social events that lead to greater collegiality and sometimes to fruitful collaborations. This was of course missing from the virtual conference. The #RDAP20 Twitter hashtag helped with some of the networking and conversational aspects of attending as we tweeted our takeaways and comments, and a #petsof RDAP hashtag spun up for those of us at home watching with our furry friends.

The poster session was another vital in-person component that was missing during the virtual event. Perhaps offering a virtual poster session in the future could be a solution. I have seen other conferences do this in the form of online poster sessions, with all the posters made available online at a certain time. This doesn't allow for the conversations that happen during the session, but would allow remote attendees to see the content, perhaps along with a moderated conversation or chat room. Another possibility would be presenting the posters as lightning talks, broken into several shorter sessions if needed, depending on number of posters submitted. Having the slides and posters hosted on the OSF conference repository also allows for a location to find these materials later.

When I started gathering my thoughts for this commentary, I thought about how this virtual attendance option could be a model and offer ideas for future conferences as more events begin to shift online. In that short time, we have since learned that RDAP 2021 will be a virtual conference. Many other conferences have also begun turning into virtual events to accommodate ongoing travel restrictions and reduced funding for professional development due to operational changes from the pandemic. As things change, it may be possible to eventually also offer a hybrid model the way RDAP was this year. In-person conferences are wonderful, but having the option to also hold some or all sessions remotely might be a more sustainable way to include more people and still offer the benefit of attending.

I am looking forward to attending RDAP 2021 virtually, connecting with colleagues online, and seeing how the technology and virtual conference experience develops. Without the time and cost of physical travel, more people may be able to attend the conference virtually. Virtual happy hours and discussions are commonplace now, and offer the potential to include some of the in-person conference activities that would otherwise be missing. Some software platforms offer breakout room capability, so events like roundtable discussions or small group meetings are

possible. As this year continues on, and we become more adept at new ways of using virtual meeting software, I look forward to seeing the creative ways we may be able to connect, continue to share our work, and grow the RDAP community.

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Disclosures

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