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Visual Resources Librarian or Digital Library Practitioner? Reflections on the 2015 DLF Forum

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Abstract

In 2015, VRA and the Digital Library Federation (DLF) sponsored the first VRA/DLF Cross-Pollinator Grant to bring a member of VRA to the annual DLF Forum, held in Vancouver from October 26-28. The annual Forum features presentations and panels, workshops, and poster sessions, and is meant to bring together practitioners from a variety of institutions who are interested in the future of digital libraries, museum and archives services, and collections. This report offers reflections on the Forum from Andrea Schuler, the recipient of the 2015 VRA/DLF Cross-Pollinator Grant.

Keywords
digital libraries, conferences, DLF, professional development

Author Bio & Acknowledgements
Andrea Schuler is the Librarian for Digital Collections at Tisch Library, Tufts University. Prior to that position, she was the Visual Resources Librarian for Islamic Architecture in the Aga Khan Documentation Center, MIT Libraries. She received her MLIS from Simmons College.

In 2015, VRA and the Digital Library Federation (DLF) sponsored a Cross-Pollinator Grant to bring a cross-pollinator from VRA – a "visual resources professional working in a library, archive, museum, or academic setting who can provide a unique perspective with DLF and share a vision of the digital library world from their perspective"[1] – to the annual DLF Forum, held in Vancouver from October 26-28.

The DLF is a "robust and diverse community of practitioners who advance research, learning, and the public good through the creative design and wise application of digital library technologies."[2] The annual Forum features presentations and panels, workshops, and poster sessions, and is meant to bring together practitioners from a variety of institutions who are interested in the future of digital libraries, museum and archives services, and collections. In 2015, over 500 people registered to attend the Forum.

I was fortunate to be chosen as the initial VRA + DLF Cross-Pollinator Fellow, giving me the opportunity to attend the Forum for the first time. At the time of my attendance, I was the Visual Resources Librarian for Islamic Architecture in the Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT, where I provided traditional visual resources support to the MIT community and also worked with a locally-managed, globally-accessible digital library, so the intersection of those two worlds has been of particular interest to me.

Until I attended the Forum, my professional development experience had taken place primarily in the area of visual resources, and I was eager for the opportunity to explore a new realm. The Forum emphasized to me something I was already beginning to see play out in my own position and across the field of visual resources: the line between the visual resources professional and the digital library practitioner is becoming increasingly blurry, and this is indeed a positive step for the profession. Much of what was presented and discussed at the Forum, while not specifically falling under the heading of "visual resources," had direct implications for the work VR professionals are doing, and echoed issues discussed with increasing frequently at VRA conferences and on VRA-L, as the profession expands its role on campus, within institutions, and in the digital world.

Safiya Umoja Noble opened the Forum with her keynote "Power, Privilege, and the Imperative to Act." In her address, Dr. Noble explored her

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research into search algorithms, biases, and results. For me, this specifically raised questions about the way we (both the broad "we" across the profession, and the "we" made up of me and my colleagues at my institution) are cataloging and making material available in our image collections and digital libraries. For visual material especially, the only access points are typically those that we, human beings, have added. As Dr. Noble's talk illustrated, everyone is operating with implicit (or explicit) biases, values, and beliefs, and despite our best efforts, our metadata is not neutral. This is something I believe is important to consider more carefully going forward, both when cataloging content and in framing the explanation of search strategies and results to users. For further reading on the topic, the Social Media Collective at Microsoft Research New England has compiled a list of readings on Critical Algorithm Studies that includes some of Dr. Noble's work.

Throughout the conference, in addition to "traditional" sessions, there were snapshot sessions on various themes that provided a series of six to eight glimpses, introductions, or summaries of projects per session. I found this format especially useful, as it allowed for learning about a number of topics at an introductory, and not overwhelming, level. Looking at the titles of these snapshot sessions it is easy to see how the Forum is relevant to the VRA community: sessions such as Metadata/Linked Open Data/UX; Digital Humanities/Digital Scholarship; Open Access/Data Management; or Archives/Digital Collections would be equally at home on the VRA conference schedule, and demonstrate the increased overlap of these two worlds. Specific subjects of interest and relevance to my work covered in these sessions included topics such as digital project workflows, meaningless/dirty metadata, controlled vocabularies, and user engagement with digital collections.

The snapshots and other sessions also introduced a variety of ideas that were largely new to me. For example, I was interested to learn about the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF). The goal of IIIF is to provide scholars with enhanced and broadened access to digitized images, books, newspapers, manuscripts, maps, scrolls, single sheet collections, and archival materials held across institutions around the world, by developing a set of application programming interfaces (APIs) to facilitate interoperability between repositories, and by developing and cultivating shared technologies that allow for viewing, comparing, manipulating, and annotating images.[3]

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[3] International Image Interoperability Framework. "About IIIF." Accessed March 24, 2016. http://iiif.io/about/

This was a topic I was generally unfamiliar with before the Forum, and while I still haven't wrapped my mind fully around the idea or how it could someday influence my work, it was to me representative of the kinds of things I hoped to get out of the Forum, and why involvement with DLF makes sense for those in VRA. IIIF takes a subject we are all familiar with and passionate about – images – and takes it a step further, truly harnessing the potential of digital libraries to make it more powerful and accessible to users.

DLF offers a number of opportunities for conference-goers, or those who were unable to attend, to engage with content outside of the in-person sessions. A number of the sessions at the Forum were livestreamed and the recordings are available on the DLF website, and all of the sessions had a Google doc for "Community Notes," where attendees were invited to record notes, comments, and questions on the session. An incredibly robust Twitter discussion can be found under the hashtag #DLFforum.

I'm enormously grateful to VRA and to DLF for giving me the opportunity to attend the Forum, and to all the organizers, presenters, and attendees at the Forum for all that I learned. The DLF community was engaging and incredibly welcoming to me and all of the other first-time attendees, and I'm eager to see future communication and collaboration between DLF and VRA.