Climate change: History in the making

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“Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it”

(Gabriel García Márquez)

Introduction

“We are making history!” This enthusiastic comment, though announced solemnly by a conference attendee at the 36th Annual Conference of the Substance Abuse Librarians and Information Specialists (SALIS), was one of the key factors that inspired founding the Substance Abuse Library and Information Studies (or SALIS Journal for short). The history of the field was the theme of the successful event hosted by the Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies in 2014.

The main purpose of launching the publication was, and still is, to make available some of the vast knowledge and experience each conference reveals for those members who are unable to attend. True to its original mission, the SALIS Journal has grown over the years, adding a scholarly perspective to the conference issue of SALIS News. Most recently, the SALIS Journal also includes publications by our colleagues from the Association of Mental Health Librarians following the first joint conference of the two organizations in Denver, Colorado in 2016.

It is my great honor and pleasure to welcome readers to browse the fourth issue of Substance Abuse Library and Information Studies. Partnering with the Association of Mental Health Librarians for the second time in 2017, the joint conference was hosted by AMHL in Worcester, MA, May 3–6, 2017, with the title “Real Health: The Importance of Professionals in Today’s Information Climate.”

Climate change in ATOD libraries

Since the inception of the SALIS Journal, our field has seen a lot of changes in just four years. The founding editors are obviously biased to point out first the one that had caused the biggest transformation in their careers, i.e., shutting down the Information
Services Division and Library at the Center of Alcohol Studies at the end of 2016. Originally at Yale, the birthplace of what we know as modern-day addiction studies, the Rutgers Center had to sacrifice significant portions of its operations, due to a change of the reporting structure to Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. The ripple effect of a major change like this on the profession in general and on SALIS specifically is to be mapped for a long period.

The conference venue in 2017, however, also brings up pleasant memories from the 2014 Rutgers conference. A panel discussion was dedicated to one of the founding fathers of alcohol studies, E. M. Jellinek, who spent a significant amount of his time in Worcester, MA before becoming renowned about his new scientific approach to alcohol. It was an extremely sad moment to realize that none of the librarians chasing Bunkyana, as we have come to refer to artifacts related to Jellinek’s life, would be able to make it to the conference. No one would have the chance to breathe the air at the former Worcester State Hospital in Massachusetts, where Bunky pursued his research and creative interests at the psychiatric facility.

The founding editors of the SALIS Journal were not the only ones unable to attend in 2017. Other members of the editorial board and many “frequent flyers”, i.e., seasoned SALIS conference presenters might have experienced similar difficulties and missed the event. Additionally, a fair amount of the presenters chose to opt out of publishing in the SALIS Journal, which is understandable, given the circumstances and the various stages the presenters are in their career. Hence this skinny fourth volume: it is significantly shorter than any of the previous three.

Missing the opportunity to present a paper or poster at a conference is one thing, but it probably damages individual careers only. Failing to be there for other presenters as an editor during the discussion also results in missing out on the advantages of informal solicitations of articles. Without a face-to-face opportunity to encourage presenters to write up their talks and convince them to submit to the SALIS Journal soon after the conference, the momentum seems to have been lost in 2017 for both the author and the editor.

Even though it was a joint conference of two “small but influential” organizations, as we often call them, the question might arise as to whether there is a genuine need for a journal, a conference, or, horribile dictu, the organization in the current information climate with a relatively low level of output. It is outside the scope of a short editorial to answer the question, however, a significantly shorter issue of the conference proceedings might be a telltale sign that calls for concern and further discussion on the survival of SALIS and AMHL in the current information climate.

How is the current information climate?

Before considering the options and potential solutions, any organization in a similar situation will probably have to do their homework first. It seems, however, that assessment criteria for success of scholarly societies and professional organizations are few and far between. In addition, there lingers the eternal question for the overworked information professional: Is this the best use of my time? At the end of the day, it boils down to the everlasting dilemma: Are we making a difference? Or if we wish to overstate, no pun intended, is it even possible to make a difference in the current information climate? What is the current information climate like anyway? How is it changing? How does it change our field?
Similar questions were in the focus of the presentations and discussions at the 39th SALIS/AMHL conference in 2017, as reflected by the articles and short communications in this issue. Serving as prime opportunities for professional development, SALIS conferences in the past were traditionally divided into two main tracks: addiction science and library and information science. Local conference hosts always excelled in finding the perfect local experts to match the interest of their audiences and fulfill the professional needs of attendees. The conference program in 2017 continues this tradition.

Section 1: On the current information climate

Among the presentations by researchers, a group from Harvard focused on the pressing issue of the 21st century plague of information science, “fake news”, by offering their own emerging hypothesis. In their paper entitled “Public health, social networks, and the digital media ecosystem: Emerging hypotheses” authors Brittany Seymour, Natalie Gyenes, Hal Roberts, Sands Alden Fish II, Fernando Bermejo, and Ethan Zuckerman compare online public health information ecosystems to complex social networks in terms of behavior. Using Media Cloud, a global archive of more than 500 million online publications, they completed over 150 case studies, including public health topics, benefiting from the open source platform developed by the Harvard Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society and MIT Center for Civic Media. In a world of rapid and extensive spread of misinformation, the Media Cloud project in public health research should definitely remain on the SALIS/AMHL radar.

Written by Amy L. Harrington, the second paper in this section entitled “The opioid epidemic: History and current treatment” gives an overview of the current opioid epidemic including both background and treatment options. Shedding light upon the significant role of physicians and pharmaceutical companies, the author suggests personalized treatment plans combining available treatments based on the individual needs of their patients, selecting from options of medication-assisted and psychosocial methods as well as other strategies, such as harm reduction.

The third article entitled “Activist Librarian II: Engaging in LGBTQ Cultural Competencies” by Juan Carlos Vega provides the reader a glimpse of the author’s journey during his career as a librarian and activist in understanding LGBTQ cultural competencies. Highlighting LGBTQ health disparities is followed by the discussion of the role of librarians and information specialists as catalysts with the strong potential of bringing competency to reduce these health disparities in their communities. One of the reviewers had a comment worth mentioning, she expressed her wish to read the article “Activist Librarian”, a lost opportunity for a publication that could have been written based on the author’s presentation at the 32nd Annual SALIS Conference, if the SALIS Journal had been in business at that time.

Section 2: Follow-up and brief reports

The next section of this issue follows a tradition established at SALIS conferences and adopted by the SALIS Journal. In general, these brief communications follow up on previous presentations, projects, and other sessions of interest to SALIS and AMHL members.

Len Levin and Zlatina Kostova share their experience with “Designing a web portal for persons with serious mental illness.” As their subtitle “Design considerations based on the literature, focus groups and an expert users survey” suggests, they have been
accumulating invaluable knowledge while working on their three-year project supported by a grant from the National Library of Medicine/National Institutes of Health. As participants of one of their focus groups, many SALIS/AMHL members are looking forward to the deliverable, an online resource that persons with mental illness can use to learn skills to more fully understand and address physical health issues they experience.

Last but not least, members will probably give a hearty welcome to a new installment from the SALIS Digs Team, an update on the SALIS Collection at the Internet Archive. With a noble aim to create an ATOD digital archive of books and government documents, the SALIS Digitization Project has been going on for over four years now in partnership with the San Francisco-based Internet Archive. Written by Sheila Lacroix, Andrea L. Mitchell, and Barbara S. Weiner, “Creating a SALIS legacy: Building an Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug (ATOD) archive with knowledge for all” points out the importance of this project in the current information climate. Amidst the closures of ATOD libraries and other climate changes, the small, international team is strongly committed to promote this innovative method of providing access to the literature.

Calling all SALIS members, again

Augmenting, perhaps ambitiously, the original aim to offer valuable content for those unable to attend the conference, the founding editors of the SALIS Journal wish to express their desire to engage more members to contribute to the next issue with their scholarly articles. If supported and approved by the SALIS Board, a more inclusive call for publication might invite authors to submit their articles either on a theme presented at the annual conference or on their own ATOD-related original research conducted during the year.

As shown by the previous three issues, the variety of topics, perspectives, styles, language and tone in the SALIS Journal is meant to represent SALIS, a group of librarians and information specialists proud to belong to an international, multicultural, and multidisciplinary organization. Bridging gaps between continents and languages, connecting people from a variety of institutions and backgrounds, hopefully, SALIS will continue to make history and a difference in the lives of others. Embracing and promoting all missions of the organization, this SALIS publication, the Substance Abuse Library and Information Studies, along with the SALIS News, is committed to remain a key contributor to it.

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