APSA 2017, San Francisco, CA

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I was able to attend the recent annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in San Francisco, California at the end of August. I know that I'm incredibly fortunate to work at a library that still has a travel budget, so I wanted to share some of my takeaways from APSA 2017 for those of you who weren't able to go.

With more than 1000 sessions presenting work from across all subfields (represented by more than 55 organized sections in the association), the APSA annual meeting is a great opportunity to keep tabs on what's happening across the discipline. With so many options, choosing what to attend can feel a bit overwhelming. My approach is to focus on three types of sessions. First, I look for sessions that highlight what appear to be broader trends in the discipline, so I can stay tuned in to emerging needs for collections or support for students and faculty in my department. Second, I look for sessions that intersect with issues of interest to libraries. And third, I like to choose a smattering of substantive panels across different subfields, partly to learn about new methods and data sources and sometimes just because the topic sounds interesting. Often, these are panels where faculty or students from my own department are presenting, which helps me keep up to date with what they're working on.

In terms of broader trends in the discipline, two issues stood out to me. First, there has been considerable discussion in political science over the past several years on the topic of promoting transparency and replication of research. For those of you who haven't been following this area, there has been a great deal of heated debate about changes to APSA's ethics guidelines intended to promote openness, replication, and research transparency in political science. For background on this debate over Data Access & Research Transparency (DA-RT), see the official website https://www.dartstatement.org/, as well as the many responses posted at https://dialogueondart.org/. Much of the most interesting deliberation is happening in the realm of qualitative methods: https://www.qualtd.net/.

I attended several panels about the implications of this on-going debate for academic publishing, data archiving and sharing, and the development of research methods, and ethics. Some of the interesting topics discussed included:

- will data archiving/sharing policies and norms create a bias against certain kinds of scholarship being produced or published?

- Advances in computer science have shown that the risk for re-identification of research subjects is much higher than was previously supposed. What are the risks to researchers and subjects of collecting, let alone archiving, data on human subjects? Are they calculable beforehand?

- A lot of important work in political science is descriptive, exploratory, and interpretive. How will this debate affect this work? Are we becoming so fixated on causation and its problems that we risk excluding other kinds of work essential to the discipline?

Another broad trend in the discipline is the increasing application of computational social science tools to political science topics. For example, one panel focused on applying computational neural network approaches to automatically classify images and video for political themes and symbols. One challenge to this research is the lack of multimedia collections with structured metadata identifying political topics that can be used as training sets for the models (an area where libraries could help?).

I also attended a panel with a trio of papers trying to investigate how political "bots" on social media are used for "astroturfing"—fake *grassroots move-*

-ments meant to sway opinion. (Interesting fact: 40% of all accounts tweeting on any given day in Russia in 2015 were bots.) They discussed a variety of methods for trying to computationally identify bot content among millions of tweets—not an easy task, as it turns out—including training computer models on a verified set of bots deployed by South Korean intelligence services that were exposed via an election scandal.

This issue of media literacy and "fake news" is an area of overlapping interest to political scientists and librarians. There were a number of panels investigating different facets of this topic. In one panel on how media funding affects fake news, representatives of major news outlets revealed that the top quality news sources are in a much more stable environment than a few years ago, because people are increasingly willing to pay for quality reporting. Their big competition is not from other news organizations, but rather against cat videos, games on people's phones, and the plethora of media choices (read distractions) people now have access to. It's a war for attention. Other panels featured research on fact-checking and its impact on political knowledge and behavior. One study found that 70-90% of statements are fact checked by only a single organization, who tend to use their own previous reporting as the evidentiary standard for their ratings. Obviously, this raises concerns about bias and subjectivity. Another study combined a survey with a program that tracked users' online web visits (with consent) to estimate that fully one quarter of American adults saw at least one fake news article in the 2016 election, including 40% of all Trump supporters.

Tellingly, 25% of study participants also read at least one fact checking article, but none read a fact check that applied to a fake news article they'd actually read.

There were many other interesting panels showcasing an amazing range of research being done in this vibrant discipline—the role of money in American politics (2% of all super PACs raise 73% of all donations), ideas for encouraging civic engagement on campus (APSA has a new book out *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*, available as a free download with accompanying resources), and attitudes toward immigration (black immigrants to the US resist assimilation to avoid discrimination against African Americans by using visible markers, especially clothes, that telegraph their foreign identity).

I wish that more libraries had the funding and the foresight to invest in their subject liaisons by sending them to the professional meetings of the disciplines they represent. It's a valuable form of professional development. Not only do I learn a lot about what's going on in political science, but I end up seeing many of my faculty and students at the conference. The faculty and students I see are delighted that I'm at the conference at all and especially that I take an interest in their work (everyone likes to see a friendly and familiar face when they present, don't they?). My attendance at the conference builds disciplinary knowledge *and relationships, and both of these are essential to the work of a liaison.*

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