This year I was fortunate to be a recipient of the new conference bursary from the Academic & Special Libraries Section of the LAI. The Digital Repository of Ireland, where I am based, is involved in many initiatives that promote the management and sharing of Digital Humanities, Social Sciences, cultural and scientific data resulting from third level research. As a librarian, I was eager to visit the International Digital Curation Conference, organised by the UK-based Digital Curation Centre, to gauge the current levels of collaboration between university library and research departments.

The first keynote speaker, Tony Hey (Senior Data Science Fellow, University of Washington), presented a journey through the development of digital curation in the last ten years. There was little consensus as to whether data management and sharing is improving or not, but all the experts he quoted seemed to agree on one thing: scientists are poor data managers.
Hey’s speech was followed by an interesting panel discussion, featuring international perspectives on open research and curation. It was noted that there has been push back from Humanities scholars in Australia to data-sharing policies, but it was agreed that national policies were vital to changing the data-sharing behaviour of scientists. Towards the end of the discussion some panellists argued that libraries have not adapted sufficiently to the changing needs of researchers in a digital world. Thankfully, there were a few counter arguments to this put forward by librarians in the audience, but it was a notable red flag.

The Birds of a Feather sessions that afternoon covered research data management requirements, with a debate on how best to gather requirements and feedback from researchers without initiating ‘survey fatigue’. A lively panel discussion closed the first day, with much disagreement about whether data curation practices were evolving fast or slowly. However all the panellists concurred that we cannot continue to fund research infrastructure on grant cycles – something the Digital Repository of Ireland would agree with wholeheartedly – as this only serves to undercut effective, long-term data preservation strategies.

The second keynote speaker was Melissa Terras (Director, UCL Centre for Digital Humanities). Terras spoke at length about the vast and varied amount of work being done in Digital Humanities for such small amounts of funding in comparison to STEM research. Despite the differences in subject matter and funding levels, Digital Humanities suffers from the same lack of data curation infrastructure and planning as the sciences.

Parallel sessions on the second day covered the varied issues of curation infrastructure, case studies and education. The sessions on education and training were particularly engaging, including a presentation on programmes that have been piloted in U.S. universities to increase digital literacy and curation skills. Liz Lyon (University of Pittsburgh) suggested that iSchools are now bridging a “data talent gap” in library and information science students. This provided much food for thought, given the ongoing debate in the library community about whether MLIS courses are sufficiently preparing librarians for the changing work environment.

Overall it was a fascinating insight into the data curation practices of the scientific community. It seems that we are, ultimately, asking researchers to care about something that they really do not care about – data management. I believe that early intervention in the education of scientists could play an integral role in curbing these attitudes. This presents an enormous opportunity for librarians, who have so much experience and expertise in the delivery of information literacy programmes.

As any librarian will testify, there is always a struggle to overcome disparaging attitudes towards our profession, but I hope that those who care about digital curation, from both the information and research communities, will continue to reach out to each other through initiatives like the Digital Curation Centre (DCC). Kevin Ashley (Director, DCC) commented in his closing remarks that, “even imperfect collaboration, and imperfect and incomplete collections, is better than no collaboration and no collections”.

Papers available at: http://www.dcc.ac.uk/events/idcc15/programme-presentations

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