Annual Report, MLA Committee on Information Technology (CIT)
23 September 2019

Committee charge

The Committee on Information Technology (formerly the Committee on Computers and Emerging Technologies in Teaching and Research) will advise on ways the MLA can encourage activities in technology useful to the membership and the association. It will identify projects from time to time that might be undertaken by the committee or the association. These projects will vary according to needs and new developments in the field; projects may deal with different aspects of technology, such as computer-assisted instruction, text-based research, electronic publication, and electronic communication. The committee will advise the staff and the council on proposals and requests relating to technology that come from members or other organizations. The ongoing activities of the committee will include disseminating information through the MLA Newsletter, organizing convention sessions, and helping the staff maintain contacts with other associations and organizations involved with the humanistic applications of technology.

MLA staff liaisons: Tom Lewek, Steve Olsen

CIT members 2018-2019:
Schuyler Esprit, Dominica State College (2018–21)
Hannah McGregor, Simon Fraser University (2017–20)
Angel David Nieves, Hamilton College (2016–19)
Annette Joseph-Gabriel, University of Michigan (2018–21)
Anne-Gaëlle Saliot, Duke University (2018–21)
Beth Seltzer, Stanford University (2016–20; 2018–20 Chair)
Amanda Visconti, University of Virginia (2017–19) (left committee before term due to time conflicts)

Incoming members:
Alexander Gil, Columbia University (2019–22)
Lisa Marie Rhody, CUNY (2019–22)
Activities of the Committee

Past Sessions

The CIT held two sessions at the 2019 MLA in Chicago. The first focused on scholarly making, considering intersections between digital humanities and critical making. The second, based on a session canceled due to weather during MLA 2018, was a workshop focused on information security for academics.

Scholarly Making: Pedagogy, Printing, Publics. Session 151, Friday, 3 January, 7:00–8:15 p.m., Hyatt Regency – Atlanta

Speakers: Emily Brooks (U of Florida), Ann Hubert (St. Lawrence U), DB Bauer (U of Maryland, College Park)

Panel Description

The maker movement — a DIY culture of technological tinkering affiliated with *Make* magazine — has had a significant impact on how many scholars teach, and on how some of us think of our research as well. Maker pedagogy, from website-building to coding to experiments with Arduinos, is on the rise; meanwhile, digital humanists have argued that making things can also be a form of research (the best-known articulation of this being Alan Gale and Stan Ruecker’s “How a prototype argues”). Meanwhile, feminist and critical race scholars have intervened in the definitions of making, seeking to challenge the association of making with fields dominated by, as Leah Buechley bluntly puts it, “rich white guys.” Instead, scholars like Buechley and Debbie Chachra call for the revaluation of the material forms of labour practiced by women and marginalized communities, from knitting and weaving to lowrider cars and DJing.

The presentations on this panel expand our definition of scholarly making by asking what
kinds of things we, as scholars, *make*, from pedagogical experiences to material artefacts to new publics. At the same time, they invite resistance to this expansion of the term; as Chachra argues, “To characterize what I do [teaching] as ‘making’ is to mistake the methods—courses, workshops, editorials—for the effects.”

*Commonsense Information Security for Academics: Session 180, Friday, 4 January, 8:30–9:45 a.m., Hyatt Regency – Michigan 1C*

**Speakers:** Beth Seltzer, Stanford University

This workshop is designed to help attendees protect their professional data by setting up basic encryption for their electronic devices, learning how to browse the internet securely, and generating strong passwords. During this informal, community-based social workshop, we can show you how to take a proactive approach to security. First, we will explain what encryption is, how it works, and why understanding it is central to keeping yourself safe online today. The event is for academics, by academics, and is designed for everyone. If you can sign into email, send a text message, or use a search engine like Google, you are equipped to secure your privacy online.

Topics will likely include: two-factor authentication, browsers, passwords, search engines, encrypting your laptop, and Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). Participants will be encouraged to bring their laptops, phones, tablets, palm pilots, or any other device to learn to secure their digital information. Resources and guides we will be drawing on include Quincy Larson’s “How to encrypt your entire life in less than an hour,” the Electronic Frontier Foundation’s “Surveillance Self-Defense,” and the “CryptoParty Handbook.”

*Future Sessions*
The CIT has organized two sessions for the 2020 convention in Seattle. These respond to current urgent issues in our profession. The first examines technology in the context of climate change, considering the cross-disciplinary role of university green initiatives and the sometimes-unacknowledged environmental costs and benefits of digital work. The second, a roundtable on digital scholarship and promotion, responds to anecdotal concerns from MLA members about the difficulties of gaining recognition for digital scholarship projects in tenure files. The roundtable brings together speakers from scholarly societies and beyond to consider how the non-standard models of digital scholarship might fit into the promotion process.

**Climate Change, Technology and Academic Responsibility**

The MIT Media Lab refers to its research efforts on climate change as “antidisciplinary.” The suggestion here is that true efforts by universities to make tangible contributions to the conversations and actions on climate change require a paradigm shift away from disciplinary limitations and towards experimentation with unlikely intersections of technology, disciplinary theory and methods, and environmental justice activism. This MLA panel is an attempt to think more actively through this idea by centering the place of the university and its technologies in climate change efforts. The aim is to address academia’s participation in environmental issues with a view to explore avenues for a green academia.

**Roundtable on “Digital Scholarship in Tenure and Promotion”**

As humanities scholars increasingly turn to digital modes of conducting and disseminating their research, the question of how institutions evaluate digital work for tenure and promotion has become even more salient. In many humanities disciplines, the largely collaborative nature of digital scholarship challenges the emphasis on single-authored works as
the so-called gold standard of scholarly production. In addition to disrupting modes and methods of research, scholars working at the intersections of digital humanities and critical race and feminist theories have called for digital scholarship that recognizes a broader range of voices as knowledge producers. How does the collaborative, open access nature of digital scholarship challenge extant notions of research and scholarly output? How might institutions better account for the labor involved in and impact of digital scholarship in tenure and promotion decisions? The panelists on this roundtable will explore these questions from their perspectives as leaders of various professional organizations and with reference to their respective guidelines for evaluating scholarship in digital media.

Other Activities

The Information Security workshop at MLA 2019 led to a *Profession* article by Beth Seltzer and Tom Lewek entitled “Information Security for Academics: Small Steps to Safeguard Your Data.” This condenses much of the information discussed in the workshop. This article is now included on the MLA’s CIT page as a reference document.

We considered and provided recommendations on the MLA’s support of the Text Encoding Initiative. Ultimately, the Committee on Information Technology recommended that the MLA continue its contributor level of support for the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) Consortium.

Our committee continues to grapple with the best format to address some of the most difficult questions raised by Information Technology in our profession. We have consistently returned to the question of technology’s role in academic care, particularly as it concerns the stressful environment of the MLA Convention itself. We considered various ways to address this, including a potential MLA Slack channel and additional academic care sessions, but have
yet to settle on the right format for this discussion. Another urgent question is the role of promotion for digital scholarship; while the upcoming Convention roundtable offers a clear next step for the discussion, we have also considered socializing best practices via blogging (as in our past series on evaluating digital scholarship on the Notes from the CIT site), podcasting, newspaper articles, and a peer-reviewed online book. Our experiments with different formats will no doubt continue as we further explore these and other questions raised by information technology in higher education.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Seltzer, CIT Chair
Academic Technology Specialist, Stanford University