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Salutations, WAML Colleagues!



This is my first message to WAML as its new president. I'm incredibly honored to serve our organization in this capacity over the next year. I must admit, though, that I've been grappling with the weight of what leadership really means these days, including how a president's address should look. The greeting above, *salutations*, seemed the most appropriate way to start. Its Latin roots remind us that health and well-being are key to true prosperity.

Now, an understatement: The world has changed since the last WAML *Information Bulletin*. We're facing new challenges to our collective health and overall well-being. Under the circumstances, how can WAML continue to prosper?

At the time of writing (early July 2020), recorded cases of the disease (COVID-19) caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) have surpassed 12,000,000 globally. The United States accounts for a disproportionate share of those cases, over 3,000,000 (one fourth). While it's a relatively merciful disease from which most recover, the loss of life is nonetheless staggering. More than 500,000 deaths have been recorded globally, with over 130,000 victims in the US alone. Infections continue to rise exponentially, especially in the US where new hotspots continue to emerge, including in core WAML geographies.^{[\[1\]](#)} (All those numbers will be far higher by the time you read this.) There's presently no end in sight to our public health crisis.



On top of the global pandemic, civil unrest is growing. America's long, deep culture wars are escalating. There's growing recognition that people of color, especially African Americans, continue to face societal systems that actively deny their unalienable human rights of dignity, respect, and decency. Structural oppression of Blacks in America is nothing new, sadly. What's new is the ease of recording and rapidly disseminating video footage of that oppression with smartphones and social media.^[2] Evidence of gross inequality and inequity is more ubiquitous now. It's simply become harder to maintain denial that bigotry persists in America, most notoriously against Blacks, but also against all people of color and others institutionally pushed to the margins.

Wait. Hold on a second. What does any of this have to do with the Western Association of Map Libraries?

Everything. Our organization is inextricable from the broader societal context in which it exists.

In practical terms, COVID-19 has changed the way we're working and raised important questions about the future of work altogether, not just in libraries or academia, but across all sectors. Our (quasi-)quarantine efforts have made telecommuting the new norm for many of us. For a profession defined by workflows involving both digital and physical library resources, these new work behaviors present new work challenges.

Most WAML members represent libraries at academic institutions. Some of our organizations' budgets, and the jobs they support, are now less secure than they've been since the so-called Great Recession a little over a decade ago. Much depends on the fiscal viability of our respective institutions themselves, which itself is often a function of revenue generated by student enrollment. That's difficult to ensure or even predict with a deadly, highly contagious virus raging. Many institutions remain closed to or are still unsure about in-person enrollment. Little is certain about the full short-, medium-, or long-term economic impacts. What is certain is that they'll be as historic and life-altering as the pandemic itself.

New phrases are circulating to describe the current coronavirus recession, whose full depths remain unknown. The International Monetary Fund has called it "The Great Lockdown".^[3] Preferring to call it "The Great Shutdown", one financial analyst declared that it's "the biggest economic disaster since the Depression of the 1930s".^[4] (That's hopefully a premature proclamation.) Either way, the reality is that



hard times are upon us, and even harder times are coming.

Interrelated public health risks and fiscal concerns, overwhelmingly expressed via an online survey,^[5] prompted the executive board's decision to make our 2020 annual meeting a fully online event. It'll be a first for WAML. I look forward to convening with all of you in mid-October. The conference website is [/conference/](#). Please be on the lookout for full details and registration information coming soon.

Looking at the bigger sociocultural context, America's divides and perpetually unresolved injustices are also relevant to WAML, directly and indirectly. On this front (and on many others^[6]), we owe a debt of gratitude to outgoing president Susan Powell. As one of her final and most important acts as president, she put us on the right side of history by leading the charge to write the unanimously endorsed executive board statement asserting WAML's solidarity with our Black brothers and sisters, and all marginalized social groups. This action has already begun to stimulate introspection and generate meaningful discourse.

But while reflection and conversation are important, the statement explicitly acknowledges that more is needed. The call remains open, perpetually open, for "ideas for concrete actions that our organization can take to support social equity and WAML's mission and goals, such as increasing our scholarship opportunities for colleagues from underrepresented groups, establishing a stronger mentorship program, or creating workshops to help harness the power of mapping to support social justice causes."^[7]

It'd be foolish to believe that we have the solutions to our collective societal problems. But how we confront them at the scale of our organization certainly plays a part in the development of those solutions. And, while cliché, great difficulties do indeed bring great opportunities. What opportunities are presented to us at this historical moment? What good can WAML create during these times? I say the answer is right in front of us. It resides in the domains of our collective expertise — maps, data, geospatial technology, librarianship.

The information, the human knowledge, we strive to organize, curate, and make accessible to the rest of the world is as important now as it's ever been. Just think of that famous water pump map made to help solve London's particularly severe cholera outbreak during the larger pandemic of the mid-19th century. Jon Snow's pioneering work in spatial epidemiology is now a transdisciplinary classic.^[8] Or think of the increasingly common GIS-based COVID-19 data dashboards actively



informing public health interventions and decision-making (or not). And think about the growing proliferation of curated web mapping applications that engage and educate users on the extent of America's primordial histories of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and other institutionalized inequities. These are profound, perspective-changing, solution-inspiring projects. They speak to the essence of why our work is so important. What we do matters.

So, yes, we face daunting challenges. But we're hardly helpless as we face them. Our small organization exists because it has the power to be a force of good in the world. We've got our work cut out for us.

And as we do our work, across our professional and personal lives, let's take the opportunity to do it more humanely, with more humanity. Let's start taking better care of ourselves, better care of each other.

Indeed, salutations.

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^[1] COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU). <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

^[2] Stern, Joanna. (13 June 2020). They Used Smartphone Cameras to Record Police Brutality—and Change History. The Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/they-used-smartphone-cameras-to-record-police-brutality-and-change-history-11592020827>; Turner Lee, Nicol. (05 June 2020). Where would racial progress in policing be without camera phones? Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/06/05/where-would-racial-progress-in-policing-be-without-camera-phones/>

^[3] International Monetary Fund. World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>

^[4] Wolf, Martin. (14 April 2020). "The world economy is now collapsing". Financial



Times. Retrieved 03 July 2020.

<https://www.ft.com/content/d5f05b5c-7db8-11ea-8fdb-7ec06edeef84>

[5] WAML. (22 May 2020). WAML 2020 Conference Opinion Survey — Results.

<https://bit.ly/3cQD2FM>

[6] WAML. 30 June 2020. WAML Accomplishments & Continuing Business. “[Waml] annual round up: WAML accomplishments & goals”. Email sent via the Maps-L email listserve, and also available at <https://bit.ly/2O36ttv>.

[7] Powell, Susan. (04 June 2020). “[Waml] a statement to the WAML community”. Email sent via the Maps-L email listserve.

[8] Rogers, Simon. (15 March 2013). John Snow’s data journalism: the cholera map that changed the world. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/mar/15/john-snow-cholera-map>

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