Digital Crisis Librarianship

field notes from the front line

→

Scott Philips Johnson
MLIS Capstone, 2024
crisis.librarian@proton.me

Project over-view

This *capstone project* is a **field report** defining how my **professional information practice** has been informed by my **library and information science skills** while working on issues related to:

- ➜ **misinformation & online rumors**
- ➜ **extremist propaganda**
- ➜ **networked conspiracism**
- ➜ **terrorism crisis informatics**
- ➜ **sociotechnical harms**
- ➜ **platform trust & safety**
- ➜ **managing digital collections of harmful information**

A digital world in crisis

Slowly and then all at once

The impacts of accelerating technological and social change have flowed into all corners of our present life.

Over the past 10 years, in response to online-offline crises, new professional and academic disciplines have emerged that study and attempt to address harms at the intersection of digital information and social conflict & violence.

In 2021, I left my previous career to also work on these issues. At the same time, I realized it was critical for me to pursue this work through the study of Library and Information Science. I jumped in and, whether through good luck or bad, landed directly in the middle of the *digital crisis*.

Project team

Present Engagements

Countering digital extremism

Information & data management at a counterterrorism nonprofit for platform trust & safety

MLIS at the University of Washington, 2024

Focusing on collective information behavior and social informational harms

Name	**Scott Philips Johnson**
Career	20 years
Occupation	[???]

Support & collaboration

In the past 3 years I've worked with researchers, analysts, technologists, content moderators, and more on projects including:

➔ Supporting design of rapid research systems for election misinformation
➔ Supporting research on technology & radicalization
➔ Crisis informatics for collaborative response to online-offline terrorist attacks
➔ Managing an industry hash-sharing database
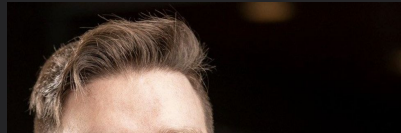
Project sponsor

Independent project

I pursued this capstone project independently with support from my sponsor, **Marc-André Argentino**, who assisted me through discussion of professional information work in one crisis discipline—using digital research for investigating violent extremist and conspiracist networks. He also advised me on my strategy for writing and publication.

Marc-André Argentino, PhD

Dr. QAnon and International Man of Mystery

➔ Public Safety Canada
➔ Accelerationism Research Consortium
➔ Recent PhD thesis in computer science and religious studies on QAnon as a new religious movement
➔ Multiple upcoming books on conspiracism and the far-right

Locating my work at the end of the world

Initially a study of other professionals' practices

Initially, my plan was to study how other researchers & practitioners in my professional network carry out their work on various crisis issues. However, I failed to crystalize the scope, aims, and execution of this first project. Ultimately, I pivoted to a different project idea to gain a new perspective.

Situating my own professional work

By zooming in to first define and contextualize my own professional work, I hoped I could situate myself and explain what I do within the broader ecosystem of crisis disciplines. Drawing on my experiences addressing various issues while also pursuing an MLIS degree, I set on the following objectives & actions…

Objectives

Apply LIS skills

Describe how library and information science skills apply to these various issues

Success

Define information practice

Define the professional role of a unique kind of information practitioner, and elaborate on their field of practice

Success

Draft field report

Draft and publish a professional field report communicating these ideas to other practitioners in various information studies and digital crisis fields

In progress

Methods

Idea ——— produce an **autoethnographic professional field report**

Reflection ——— **personal reflection** on past 3 years of professional, academic & independent work on digital crisis issues

Review ——— **review of LIS knowledge** via curricula, syllabi, readings, & assignments

Analysis ——— define scope & responsibilities of a **unique professional role**

Communicate findings ——— **communicate the nature & importance** of this role in my community

Making libraries from rabbit holes

This process led me to identify the scope of the various and intersecting social information problems I work on as '**digital crisis work**', and to define the unique professional role I play in this space as '**digital crisis librarianship**'

What is digital crisis librarianship?

Digital crisis librarianship helps people and organizations find and make sense of information about extreme and harmful subjects in a fractured and adversarial information environment

Digital crisis librarians provide information services for researchers, analysts, policy-makers, trust & safety professionals, and more, dealing with issues like disinformation and extremism.

This project identified *five areas of focus* for **digital crisis librarianship**, comprising 3 key information services and 2 areas of ethical and professional responsibility.

Digital crisis librarianship areas of focus

01
Extreme subject matter librarianship

02
Crisis informatics & adversarial information research

03
Harmful information & data management

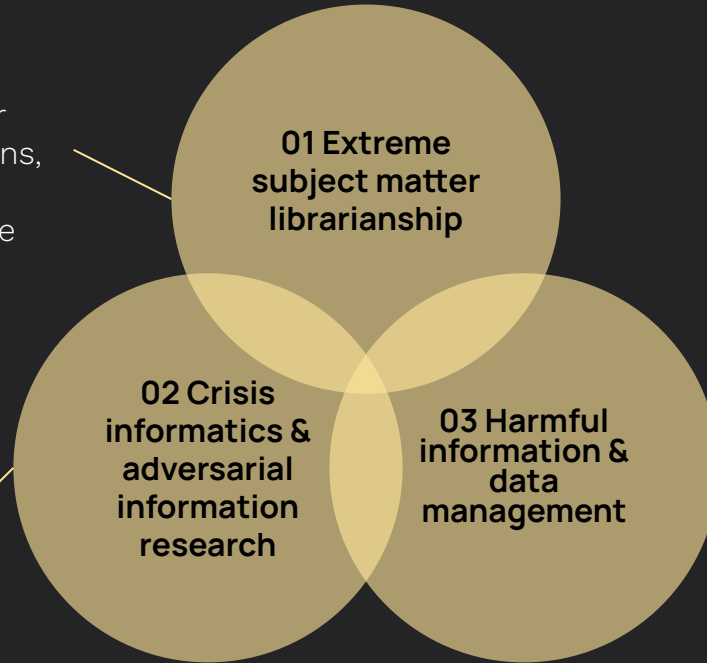**04**
Critical information studies

05
Management of crisis information organizations

Digital crisis information services

Serving the information needs of digital crisis professionals and communities: understanding their information worlds and interactions, organizing key information resources, and providing reference and research services

Supporting rapid response information work, digital research and archiving, meta-literacy of digital cultures and online-offline behavior, and locating and representing extreme subjects in a disordered & manipulated information environment

01 Extreme subject matter librarianship

02 Crisis informatics & adversarial information research

03 Harmful information & data management

Running sustainable and trustworthy digital repositories for harmful information across the lifecycle of data management, curation, and preservation—including: research data libraries, digital evidence collections, platform content moderation systems, etc.

Ethical and professional responsibilities

Addressing critical social and ethical questions about power and harm in information: critical classification, epistemic pluralism, racial and indigenous justice, intellectual freedom, privacy & surveillance, sociotechnical harms, and reflexive issues of bias and control in information systems

04 Critical information studies

05 Management of crisis information organizations

Leading and managing digital crisis organizations with a focus on professional ethics, cultural competence and diversity, worker wellbeing and safety, and contending with institutional harms and vocational awe in crisis information work

Reflecting on the widening gyre

Clear understanding of my career direction

The main outcome of this project was developing a clear vision for the future direction of my professional career by articulating a unique career track that can be employed across various digital crisis disciplines and that brings together all of my ongoing work, interests, and knowledge.

Reframing the value of my work right now

The project also helped me reframe the daily professional work I do right now by clarifying the context and value of the professional services I provide while revealing several key projects I can pursue or collaborate on to support other digital crisis workers (like my project sponsor).

Where do I go from here?

Write and publish an academic paper

My goal is still to write and publish a field report on digital crisis librarianship

Develop awareness in my professional community

After writing this article, I plan to socialize this unique area of information services and support for digital crisis workers within my professional community

Collaborate on digital crisis library projects

Finally, now that this project and my MLIS degree are wrapping up, I can pursue a variety of digital crisis librarianship project opportunities that have presented themselves alongside my ongoing professional employment

Gratitude

To my wife and partner, for being the ground to my air

To my friends and colleagues in the OSD crew, whose work is an inspiration for everything I do today

To Mike Caulfield and Kate Starbird of the University of Washington, for sponsoring the initial version of my project and whose questions and interactions both in the early stages of my capstone and throughout the past several years helped me clarify where I am focusing my attention

Thanks!

Do you have any questions?

crisis.librarian@proton.me