

## **Data and the Construction of Reality**

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Does data construct reality? The quick answer is ‘No, of course not!’ because only human minds construct meaning. But that is too simple because we construct meaning from the evidence of which we are aware. So the evidence that is at hand greatly influences what we perceive, how we understand it, and, therefore, how our understanding of reality is constructed. It is not simply a matter of what evidence exists, but of what we have at hand and, also, of how it appears to us and the contexts within which we see it. So it is not only the creation and preservation of resources that matter, but also the stewardship of it, including whether we are aware of it, can discover it easily enough, and what it looks like.

Digital evidence presents an additional problem. Since we cannot understand digital data in the raw, we must depend on it being visualized and the form of visualization makes a difference. We generate data and we try to make sense of it. We construct reality from it. There is an old saying: “Man makes clothes and clothes make the man,” meaning that how we assess people depends on their appearance. But we select and wear the clothes which give this impression. The same is true in digital environments: How we are known digitally is based on records that we create and on data that is collected about us as a by-product of our digital actions. We create the data and the data creates us, or at least our digital persona. For these reasons, the topics of this conference – documentation, accessibility, representation, stewardship, and usability – take on great significance.