Open Up Your Libraries

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The annual ILI/Enterprise Search Europe (ESA) conference took place on Tuesday 20th and Wednesday 21st October at Olympia in London. Delegates and speakers from twenty-seven different countries came together to discuss a wide range of topics, from new technologies, services and business models to the changes we must make to serve our users and communities better.

The atmosphere at the conference was very welcoming with people eager to talk and share information and knowledge. If I had to summarise this conference in one word it would have to be "open". Open in the sense of open doors, open source, open access, open minds, open arms.

"Opening eyes" may have been keynote David McCandless' goal in presenting us with striking data visualisations. The author of "Information is Beautiful" and "Knowledge is Beautiful" believes data visualisation is fun! He wants us all to get stuck in and get our hands dirty in what to his mind is the "new soil" in which to grow our knowledge. His visualisations surely look inviting. Not only are they beautiful, but they also make you understand the data instantly.

David concluded that there are many more categories of "Big Data" than there used to be. Data can be organised into structured data, which becomes information that we can link. Linked information leads to knowledge, which we then share, so it becomes interconnected knowledge. This is an organic process, building up the "body of knowledge". He argued that you couldn't see data in isolation, but need to place it into its context. That way data acquires meaning. Only when shown in context does it reveal its real meaning, or "truth."

Now here lies a role for librarians. What librarians have always done with information, they can also do with data, just on a bigger scale. We should collect the data, organise it, identify the patterns, analyse, curate and disseminate it. In doing so we can make sense of it and we can pass on that knowledge to the wider public. We can help them validate the data, so as to better judge its usefulness, just like we do with traditional information resources.

Data visualisation requires new skills, but these are not that difficult to learn; start by doodling on paper - that's how David does it. Another aspect of data visualisation that should appeal to librarians is the element of storytelling in it. Data visualisation only becomes interesting when you have a good story to tell.

"Open" was the buzzword in the "tech" session I went to. Open source software is being used in innovative ways by libraries to save money on systems. Simon Barron from Imperial College London talked about how open source systems can break down silos in organisations and how important it is for librarians to understand what code is about. If writing code is not for you, team up with a developer is his advice. IC's open source system Kuali is community based, which should appeal to librarians. It fits open data very well and gives access to the deeper layers of data; just what David McCandless recommended in his keynote that librarians should do. Open source software forms an alternative to propriety software from companies that seek to control more and more of our lives. Phil Bradley highlighted this in his presentation on Google and other search tools. Search engines like Google try to manipulate our opinions by presenting biased search results, or influence our choices by listing preferred results. One example would be a search for plumbers only displaying information about plumbers who feature on the Google+ social network. He thinks Google is losing out to [Bing](#) and [Yahoo](#) and people are moving away from the bigger search engines in favour of social searching in online communities and alternative, less intrusive search tools, like [DuckDuckGo](#) or [Yandex](#).

Jodie Ginsberg, from [Index on Censorship](#), in her keynote on the second day, gave a stark picture of the present situation on censorship. She reminded us about the fundamental role of librarians as guardians of both privacy and freedom of expression. She talked about how freedom of speech is under threat across the world. Censorship is everywhere, including in our own society where self-censorship is on the rise, after the Charlie Hebdo attacks. It is (always has been) our role to educate people on freedom of expression, surveillance and privacy and how to protect themselves from problems arising from social media platforms (be careful what/who you retweet). These issues are all an essential aspect of information literacy. There is a fine line between privacy and free expression and the two are all too often seen as contradictory. Jodie explained they are not incompatible, that one is necessary to ensure the other.

She discussed challenges to academic freedom, warning against the trend in universities where "controversial" speakers are banned from debate for fear of offending. Being offended is a choice and we should not get over-sensitive. This is also true for the law to protect children from certain content on the web. Blocking specific content is very difficult to do and it is debatable whether it will work. Librarians can help people in dealing with these issues, but it doesn't seem that they are doing enough to defend freedom of speech and privacy.

Other new roles that were discussed during the sessions were community support and Maker Labs. Libraries are still at the very heart of communities. They open their doors and go out to meet their users. They go into new territories such as boardrooms, schools and places where people meet. Libraries are at the heart of their communities, teaming up with job centres, community centres, health services, for example, but they can only do

that when they have a strong core library function. People love coming to libraries, as long as they offer them new and exciting things. A trend that popped up time and time again during the conference was Maker Spaces. This is totally new for libraries, but when you come to think of it, it makes sense. We know that libraries have always been about learning and that they are open, safe and welcoming places for all. So what better place to learn new technologies, or how to make things, whether with a 3D printer, a laser cutter, or more traditional tools than in your local library? In the northern province of Friesland in the Netherlands the traditional mobile library has been transformed into a truck carrying 3D printers and other tools to make stuff. The team went on a trip across Europe to promote the Maker Space truck. It is mobile, flexible, open and offers users an opportunity to learn about the latest technologies.

In Australia librarian Donna Kellion organised a "maker space" event, inviting young and old to attend in a day all about social engagement and skills sharing. With the help of a 3D-printer people could make objects and learn some DIY skills on the way. These projects demonstrate how the library accommodates collaborative working within the community, by opening its doors to new ideas and technologies. This will not replace he library as a place for quiet study, but adds value.

Another way libraries are opening up to the public is by inviting the general public to help out with projects like cataloguing and multimedia design. Through crowd sourcing projects the general public help libraries to enhance their metadata, identify items, or develop tools to use with digital collections. Examples of these were demonstrated by Stella Wisdom from the British Library, with her presentation of the ‘Off the Map’ videogame competition.

Other hot topics included Altmetrics – an open source form of non-traditional metrics proposed as an alternative to more traditional impact metrics. I attended only one session on this, which was given by Peter Nieuwenhuizen. He has experimented with altmetrics and discussed if it could be used effectively to measure library impact and inform decision-making.

Farradane Award
The second day saw two award ceremonies; one at ILI in the morning and one at ESA in the afternoon.

First up was the Farradane Award, named after Jason Farradane, who was instrumental in establishing the academic discipline of information science in Britain and one of the founders of the Institute of Information Science.

This year the Award went to Sheila Webber for her outstanding work in teaching information science and for raising the profile of the information profession. Sheila is Senior Lecturer at the Information School, University of Sheffield; Head of the Libraries and Information Society Research Group; Director of the Centre for Information Literacy Research and Director of Alumni Relations of the iSchool. She has a deep understanding of the library world and the pressures we all face in the information age. She expressed her delight in having been recognised for her hard work in promoting information literacy

among a wide audience. She will be contributing her reflections and thoughts to eLucidate in an article in one of our issues for 2016.

Strix Award

Later that day the 2015 Tony Kent Strix Award 2015 Ceremony took place at the parallel conference of Enterprise Search Europe. The Award is presented by UKeiG in association with the Chemical Information and Computer Applications Group of the Royal Society of Chemistry; the International Society for Knowledge Organisation UK and the British Computer Society Information Retrieval Specialist Group.

Doug Veil presented the award to Peter Ingwersen, Professor Emeritus at The Royal School of Library and Information Science, University of Copenhagen, as well as Professor II at Oslo University College, Norway and Docent at Abo Akademi University, Finland. Professor Ingwersen's work includes the first and most detailed empirical study of people's interactions with human search intermediaries using a naturalistic approach, which was used to develop tools such as Siri. He coined the term' Webometrics' to describe the applications of bibliometrics and infometric approaches to information structures, technologies and resources on the web. He also will be contributing his reflections and thoughts to eLucidate in an article in one of our issues for 2016 and I look forward to this year's 2016 Strix lecture, when he will speak about his work.

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