

Partnerships, innovation, collaboration: CILIP 2016 Conference

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On a glorious warm and sunny summer's day in July 2016 five hundred information professionals from all over the country gathered in the magnificent Brighton Dome for the largest library conference in the UK. This report will focus on some of the presentations and outcomes from the event. I can only comment on the sessions I attended, but [all of the presentations](#) are available on CILIP's website.

What struck me more than any other conference I've attended was how a well-organised event can help you re-focus, take one step back and reflect on what the profession is doing and why. For me the buzzwords of this conference were "Partnerships", "Innovation" and "Collaboration." The person ticking all these boxes was [Scott Bonner](#) who is Director of a small [public library](#) in the neighbourhood of Ferguson, St. Louis, United States, which erupted following the shooting of Michael Brown. Despite some hair-raising stories about events in autumn 2015, what impressed me most was how this completely ordinary guy dealt with a severe crisis by doing everything in his power to help his community. His view is that what we call "normal in libraryland" is "pretty darn awesome," only we don't see it like that. ("The work we do every day is good training for stepping up when our community is in crisis. In crisis, just be a library, only more so.") His keynote was the best I have ever heard, because it was so human. He did not hide his feelings of doubt, or failure. On the contrary, he told us not to be afraid of regrets, or to mess up, as long as we DO SOMETHING. Scott made sure that when all other public services including schools had closed, his library stayed open and took over the functions of the closed institutions. He also emphasised that in his view libraries are neutral, open to anyone and doing what users want them to do.

This was at first glance contrary to the last keynote of the conference, [Lauren Smith](#), Research Associate, School of Education, University of Strathclyde, who very strongly proposed that what libraries do is always political in a period of austerity: library closures, de-professionalisation and redundancies. ("Libraries are not neutral.") However, I feel she and Scott want the same thing, namely to do what is good for the community and the people that live in it. It's just that Scott has a less partisan way of communicating this. No raised fists on his slides, but instead lists of actions he took, projects he started, partners he spoke to, always with the user at the heart. He innovated his services, not so much by technology, although social media played a big part, but by engaging with new audiences to a much greater degree than before. He collaborates with anyone who wants to do so. He doesn't confront authorities, but he shows his crucial role in keeping the community

safe in times of crisis and provides comfort and support. And yet, he hardly has any budget and is not supported by public funds. I found it profoundly heartening and encouraging. Scott Bonner set a practical example of how to prove a library's worth.

Evidence

Dr. Alison Brettle, Reader in Evidence Based Practice and Acting Director of Post Graduate Research, presented on how a rigorous [systematic scoping review](#) of the evidence has helped prove “the value, effectiveness and importance of professionally trained librarians, information and knowledge workers” at a time when LIS professionals are not always viewed as valuable to institutions. Her [slides](#) are well worth reviewing alongside the report “[Being Evidenced Based in the Library Information Practice](#)” (Facet) she co-wrote with Denise Koufogiannakis.

Knowledge Management

[Rebecca Dorsett](#), Information and Knowledge Manager for the [Defense Equipment and Support Service](#) Airworthiness Team was employed after it became clear that a large number of information recording errors contributed to the deadly accident with a Nimrod aircraft in Afghanistan in 2006. She presented on the challenges of information management in a large government organisation highlighting the importance of information and information professionals to the defence sector.

Open Data

Changes in the information environment have compelled libraries to forge collaborations and partnerships, demonstrated to great effect in [Sir Nigel Shadbolt's](#) keynote about the opportunities and challenges of Open Data. His partners consist of everyone who deals with data, data centres, rights holders and information professionals. We are essential to organise and curate data, support data owners, make data more open, train people in data literacy and link data with other data. (“Your knowledge and insights, methods and techniques more important, more central more required than ever. You are essential to making data capture, publication, analysis and interpretation business as normal.”) Open data has benefits for all aspects of society: political, economical, social and cultural.

Reinvent Yourself

It was exciting to hear about the innovative ways libraries have developed to adjust to changing environments, whether it is cuts to funding, or fast moving developments in technology. [Neil Infield](#) from British Library told us how the Patent Library was transformed into the [BIPC](#). Librarians retrained to be business consultants, running workshops, organising networking events and advising would-be entrepreneurs on how to set up a business. It is one of the most vibrant departments of the BL, with off shoots in ten other cities in the UK.

Engaging on Social Media

[Adam Koszary](#) runs the social media for the [Bodleian Library](#). His [presentation](#) showed the hard work that goes into engaging with the public via social media and provides some excellent practical tips and advice on how best to utilise social media for maximum

effect. (“Ensure that social media channels are being used optimally both strategically and tactically to maximise reach, engagement and impact.”) He also highlighted the significant challenges of using social media: the constraints of Twitter, for example. The remark that stuck with me most was: “writing 25 captions and using only one.” That made me sigh with relief: It is not just me! All his efforts pay off, as the statistics show.

Digital Creativity

[Makerspaces](#) are creative, participatory DIY spaces where people can go to “create, invent and learn.” Libraries from the North of the Netherlands to Australia organise free, open events where people can play around with 3D printers, electronic cutters, robotics and electric circuits. Like Scott Bonner in Ferguson the staff are willing to try out something new, unfamiliar and work hard to make it happen with limited resources. These events are hugely popular. It’s a matter of being brave, trying out something new and seeing how it goes.

A Public Library Vision

[Kathy Settle](#), CEO of the [Library Taskforce](#), presented on “[Libraries Deliver Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021](#),” which articulates a vision for, and commitment to, public libraries in England. She highlighted that libraries and the people working in them change lives in many ways:

- Promoting enjoyment in reading and other cultural and creative activities
- Raising aspirations and building skills so people can achieve their full potential
- Actively sharing information, encouraging people to engage with, co-create and learn from each other
- Providing trusted and practical support and advice to those who need it

Resulting in:

- Stronger, more resilient communities
- Increased reading and literacy
- Improved digital access and literacy
- Helping everyone achieve their full potential
- Healthier and happier lives
- Greater prosperity
- Cultural and creative enrichment

The conference exuded an atmosphere of optimism, positivism and energy.

Marja Kingma, December 2016

Jodie Hewitt, recipient of UKeiG’s CILIP Conference Award and Assistant Learning Spaces Manager at Walsall College, also shared her experiences of her first ever professional conference, in an article in [Information Today Europe](#) (4th November 2016) entitled “Brighton Rocks - lessons learned at a national conference.”

“I was lucky enough to win a UKeiG bursary to attend the CILIP conference in Brighton [last year.] Without UKeiG's help, I would not have been able to attend. It was such a great learning experience that I have been motivated to identify and sign up to other professional events. I work in the FE sector and am a student too. This helped me choose to attend talks in the Managing Innovations track of the conference. I found the Knowledge Management talks by Stephen Phillips and Paul J Corney incredibly useful as I am currently studying Information Literacy and Knowledge Management at university. The talks helped me think about the application of KM principles to my own work practices, such as reaching outwards from my department to target senior managers. At work we routinely achieve many things but unfortunately, as is common with libraries, that work is not easily translated into hard data that can be measured against targets. They suggested approaching the promotion of library work as highlighting the objective of the task and the subjective impact to enable management to see the work accomplished in a similar format to other data driven areas. In my case, working in a FE college facing budget cuts, it is vital to be able to showcase our reason for existing.

My overall impression of the conference was one of amazement. For the first time I was truly aware of the diversity of the Library and Information Sector. I really enjoyed meeting and talking to all the different attendees and hearing their stories of where they work and what they do. This was my first conference and it has greatly boosted my confidence and interest in information and libraries. The conference has given me a new perspective on what the professionals of the Information and Libraries world are involved in and what can be achieved with the right information at the right time. I would like to pass on my thanks to UKeiG for offering me the opportunity to attend the CILIP Conference.”