

# A view from Oxford Road:

## Reflections on CILIP's 2019 conference @ University of Manchester

Stephen Furlong, Information and Engagement Officer, Careers Service,  
University of York

*stephen.furlong@york.ac.uk*

In my role I don't get the chance to attend many information-specific events. I am an Information and Engagement Officer in the Careers service at the University of York. I help students search and analyse career-related information, manage a set of career-related information resources and share labour market information amongst our teams.

A bursary from UKiG to attend the 2019 CILIP Conference gave me a rare opportunity to meet other information professionals and hear what was going on in the sector. This report is an overview of the sessions I attended and the key points I took away from the experience. Wherever possible I have focused on electronic information, but the scope of the conference and the sessions I attended meant not everything I heard or reflected on took this focus. I've linked to relevant resources where they're available.

Ahead of the conference I was keen to learn more about good data practices and information management, but apart from that I intended to be open-minded and attend a range of sessions. In hindsight, this made for a disjointed experience - an opinion shared by several people I talked with at the conference - and made it hard to pull key themes for a report like this. Nonetheless, I've tried to summarise what I learned into a few broad areas.

### **Individual and collective reflection**

The importance of reflection was mentioned repeatedly, especially in the keynote talks.

[Liz Jolly](#), Chief Librarian at the British Library, captured this in her keynote on librarianship and professional identity. Citing writers like Paulo Freire and Jennifer Moon, Liz encouraged delegates to be reflective practitioners and consider questions like: what are our individual values and vision? Do we have limits that we won't cross, and why?

Liz also had questions for the profession as a whole - or perhaps, the library part of the profession - asking if we had made librarianship too exclusive through our focus on professionalism and a "fetishising" of Masters' degrees. From discussions during the conference there appeared to be some consensus building that, considering the cost of postgraduate study and the extreme lack of diversity in the profession, such a reliance on a Masters' degree for entry into many professional-level roles was unjustifiable.

There was much I valued in this keynote. Most of all I appreciated Liz's honesty talking about professional and personal setbacks, mirroring a trend in recent years of senior managers being more open about failures, weaknesses and fears.

[Patrick Lambe](#) continued the reflective theme with his keynote on knowledge in society and our role in it. Patrick argued that creating the theoretical "good citizen" involved several professions that contributed to productive knowledge use. These include journalists, teachers, economists and librarians, among others.

Hearing this, I wondered how many people walking along Oxford Road in Manchester outside the conference centre would put librarians on that list. I imagine many would be bemused at their inclusion. It's not surprising then that Patrick also argued we should be more vocal about the important work we do in knowledge creation. Easier said than done.

[Hong-Anh Nguyen](#), Information Centre Manager at The King's Fund, gave the first keynote on day two. Her talk entitled "Questioning Diversity" asked delegates to consider whether their organisations were racist. In a compelling and inspiring talk, Hong-Anh detailed the unacceptable statistics showing the whiteness of the profession, outlined the extent of structural racism in society and our workplaces and encouraged everyone to take action - especially those in privileged positions.

Among the initiatives in place at The King's Fund, I was impressed by a mentoring scheme in which people in positions of responsibility - senior managers, for example - were mentored by people in lower grade roles. Hong-Anh described this as a good process because people in positions of power are not always in the position to hear direct feedback from people "lower down" an organisation.

[DILON](#) (Diversity in Libraries of the North) has an excellent blog on [being an ally](#).

## Digital innovation

As ever, using technology in new ways came up repeatedly. A panel session with Olly Hellis from Somerset Libraries, [Val Stevenson](#) from Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) and [Andy Tattersall](#) from the University of Sheffield gave an insight into how different sectors are using tech.

Olly outlined the work happening in the [Glass Box](#) in Somerset Libraries, an innovation and enterprise space in Taunton Library, which helps to build digital skills, provide a place to research, study and collaborate, and engage people with other areas of the library service.

Olly noted how important it was that the library subscribed to electronic resources that members of the public couldn't access for free on the Internet. For example, he said that subscribing to [COBRA](#) and [Mint UK](#) gave people wanting to start a business a lot of help they couldn't get elsewhere, and encouraged them to use the space. I haven't worked in

public libraries, but I imagine it is becoming increasingly difficult for public librarians to argue for expensive subscription rates, so I appreciated Olly's forthright stance.

Val Stevenson outlined LJMU's work to "correct the disjointed digital experience" in their library through the creation of a [virtual library vision document](#). This involved aiming to create an excellent customer experience in their digital spaces, replicating the physical space in their digital space and creating a digitally enabled physical space. I found this talk very helpful and topical. I think any information professional working in a customer-facing service will understand the difficulties in creating a coherent service across its physical and digital spaces. In my experience, digital and physical spaces have both improved dramatically in recent years, but perhaps not with each other in mind.

Andy Tattersall's talk encouraged us to ask the right questions of the third-party vendors offering tech solutions, and of any piece of technology or digital resource we are considering adopting into our working practices:

- How often will you use the technology?
- Who created it and who owns it?
- Can you export your content?
- Are they [the vendor/creator] on social media and do they post regular updates? [Andy suggested social media use is a good indicator of the state of a business]
- Is it intuitive to use?
- What do you get with the free version?
- Is there an alternative?
- How long has it been around?

On reflection, I don't think I have always asked these questions, but I intend to in future. Andy also suggested that sometimes it's good to rush into new technology if it clearly has benefits and works well. [Canva](#) was Andy's example of this. Other times, it's better to wait and assess before using, especially if embracing new tech involves other people getting on board.

[Kriti Sharma](#), founder of [AI For Good](#) and a [TED Talk alumna](#), covered technology in her opening keynote on ethics in AI. While most of the talk covered what should be familiar ground for information professionals, I found it timely and interesting. The talk focused on many things, including the lack of diversity in the tech sector and the subsequent biased algorithms that are emerging in systems we use every day. Kriti cited a recent [news report](#) about an automated job shortlisting system created by Amazon, which was rejecting an inordinate number of women because it was based on biased data (as in, the historic biased recruitment processes of tech companies over many years). Shocking, yes, but there is a positive take on this: because it was a biased algorithm rather than the unconscious bias of a shortlisting panel, the issue was identified and will now presumably be corrected. Too hopeful?

This was an important talk to open the conference with. I think sometimes AI developments can seem detached from our daily work, but many of us now work with and

rely on complex algorithms, and we need to make sure we are aware of the potential for biased systems and be able to spot them.

On a slight tangent, the topic of digital innovation arose on the breakfast seminar on day two hosted by [EveryLibrary](#). EveryLibrary is a US organisation working with CILIP (with funding from Arts Council England) to help campaign for public library funding. It plans to do this through a new website - [Libraries Deliver](#) - which, if successful, will create a network of engaged people who care about libraries and who, crucially, can be contacted to sign petitions, donate and campaign. EveryLibrary stressed that it's GDPR compliant. This differs from the current campaigning situation, in which we know very little about the people willing to campaign for public libraries.

The website is built on the [Nation Builder](#) platform, a tool used by Emmanuel Macron's La République En Marche party and the People's Vote movement to quickly harness public engagement and build a political movement. It will be interesting to see how successful it is.

## Good data

Stephan Hollaender, senior lecturer at the Universities of applied science in Geneva and Chur, and [Julian Schwarzenbach](#), director of the consultancy firm Data and Process Advantage, discussed good data behaviour.

Stephan focused on the effect of data on the librarian's role, suggesting that librarians have been late to focus on the potential of unstructured data. He suggested that in the near future we will see the traditional library management system replaced with an AI module allowing real-time analytics, personalised customer service (for example, through text bots and text mining) and the ability to predict user trends. Stephan focused on the importance of using AI tools to help librarians analyse trends, but warned of potential risks: resistance to data driven changes, no control over data (for example, from restrictive third party vendors or cloud services), unclear roles (who is responsible for it?), and too much data and high costs/over promising by vendors.

Julian, on the other hand, stressed that while AI has a role to play in data management and analysis, it was not an alternative to good data behaviour. He looked at how data-based decisions had risen in recent years, but warned of organisations unwittingly falling into the mantra of ['garbage in, gospel out'](#) - in other words, make sure you aren't making data-based decisions that are fundamentally flawed because of poor data behaviour.

What does this poor data behaviour look like? It is updates not done, a history of failed data migrations and spreadsheets filling in the gaps between databases. Over the years, this bad data governance is impossible to reverse and makes for unreliable analysis. I'm sure anyone who has worked in libraries and has experienced the pain of migrating poor bibliographic metadata across library systems can relate to this.

Julian had created [The Data Zoo](#) to help understand data behaviour and advocate for positive governance. This is a helpful tool to reflect on the data practices in any organisation, and I'll be using it to think about how my team works with information.

Taking questions from the audience, Stephan and Julian agreed that information professionals had an obligation to understand data and talk about data literacy. I agree with this point and wonder how many information professionals feel confident talking about or working with data.

## Good knowledge management

CILIP is working hard to engage people working in knowledge and information management, and it was evident in the dedicated K&IM strand of conference sessions. I don't work in knowledge management, but I'm keen to incorporate good KM practices into how my workplace shares labour market information.

Sandra Ward, [James Freed](#) and Oliver Rolfe gave some context around the [Information as an asset](#) board agenda published earlier this year by CILIP and KPMG. The document is a handy primer advocating for the need for good knowledge and information management in what is an increasingly complex information environment. While the document is aimed at board level, I discovered a lot in it that will help anybody wanting to advocate for better KM in their team, department or organisation. I'm certainly going to use it as a tool to help me argue for good KM in a way that colleagues can understand.

In an interesting panel session on K&IM in government Derek Shaw and Larry Mount (from the Ministry of Defence) and Dominic Davies (from the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory), discussed the K&IM issues they face and their solutions. A lot of it would be familiar for people in any sector: ageing staff, multiple unconnected IT systems and storing "old" information in sustainable and accessible ways. Dominic Davies talked about approaching K&IM from a people perspective: people make it happen, and people will only behave in the desired way if organisational culture and reward/recognition match the desired behaviour. Like the previous talk, this firmly positions K&IM as a management practice.

From these talks I took away some simple approaches that will help me think about how my department shares its knowledge. Organisations need to embrace open working as the default and make knowledge capture part of normal working practices.

The final session I attended - Better information behaviour with [Katharine Schopflin](#) and [Tom Midgley](#) from the information management team at London Borough of Hackney - was the most insightful and helpful session of the conference.

Katharine recounted her experiences of implementing KM practices in different ways. We looked at top-down approaches in which new programmes and strategies are introduced, new roles and departments are created, and change management process are implemented. Top-down is good because it means the leadership is on your side, but it can fail because people don't like to be told how to do their jobs. Embedding KM in job

descriptions, targets and key performance indicators (KPIs) can feel like a box-ticking exercise, and gamification only works as long as the prizes exist.

Instead, Katharine suggested “living with imperfection” and accepting that culture change isn’t the job of a knowledge manager. Instead, we should focus on getting buy-in from process owners, have relevant KPIs to measure and enable self-service tools so people can share and store knowledge management themselves.

Tom summarised KM as: observing behaviours, introducing efficient nudges to influence behaviour and “swimming with the tide”. He referenced the [EAST report](#) from The Behavioural Insights Team as a helpful primer on introducing “nudges” to affect how people work.

## Conclusion

What did I learn at the conference? Perhaps that I work in the borderlands of the profession and it’s hard to equate a lot of what I do with the talks I heard at the conference. Maybe that was true for a lot of the people attending this cross-sector conference. Nonetheless, I’ve learned that I need to work on my data skills, that I’m closer to implementing good knowledge management practices than I thought, and I need to ask better questions about the information resources we subscribe to. Thanks to the sessions I attended, I think I have the tools I need to achieve these things.

I’m grateful to UKeiG for the bursary to attend this conference. I enjoyed the rare opportunity to meet people from across the profession. With the support of my colleagues at York I hope I can improve our services using what I learned.