

# A view from Oxford Road: Reflections on CILIP's 2019 conference @ University of Manchester

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## Introduction

The UK has always pioneered fresh ways of viewing librarianship as a profession. I have been an information professional for over seven years, and during that time there have always been aspects of librarianship that people thought would 'die out.' The need for librarians in an 'information age', for example. How often have we heard that 'Google can find the results', and so on? However, aren't we now more important than ever before? Perhaps more so than any other period? I think that mid-career professionals are looking at a future where we need to learn to marry the soft skills of the profession with the harder, more technical skills required to specialise and adapt to an evolving need within society.



I am currently a User Research Consultant at Methods, Information Technology and Services. Projects are focussed mainly in the public sector and to date I've worked with the Education, Skills and Funding Agency and the Department of Education. Attending the 2019 CILIP Conference through the generosity of the UKeiG CILIP Conference Bursary, gave me the opportunity to connect with old friends, make new friends, and network with a community that I usually only interact with online. It's easy to forget how diverse the profession is with the myriad roles and personalities that make up an increasingly nuanced industry.

*(Natasha Chowdory and Stephen Furlong, recipients of the 2019 UKeiG CILIP Conference Bursary)*

This article will articulate my interpretations of key conference themes, and their relevance to Knowledge and Information Management (K&IM). I've included links to some of the presentations and you can visit the [full 2019 conference programme](#) to explore further. Full coverage of the event on Twitter is at: [@CILIPConf19](#) and [#CILIPConf19](#) and the CPD, Revalidation, Fellowship podcast [Librarians with Lives](#) chatted to conference delegates, speakers, organisers and vendors.

### Day One 'Technology changes, people don't' (Kriti Sharma)

Kriti's comment sums up day one of the conference for me. Kriti Sharma ([Artificial Intelligence technologist, business executive and humanitarian](#)) opened the event with a great keynote: 'Can AI create a fairer world?'

*'Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms make important decisions about you all the time - like how much you should pay for car insurance or whether or not you get that job interview. But what happens when these machines are built with human bias coded into their systems? In this keynote, technologist Kriti Sharma will explore how the lack of diversity in tech is creeping into AI and will offer three ways we can start making more ethical algorithms. She will share a vision for how AI technologies can create a better, fairer society if applied to solving the right problems.'*

This very interesting keynote explored the skills needed in the future to bring the best of humans and machines together. Algorithms are only as good as the people writing them and they can only work with the data that they're given, and if that data is flawed...

Sharma's call for the need for data and technology ethics within the technology sector was something that resonated with me, and I think it will with anybody who is involved with K&IM in an organisation. AI must be held to account and so must users. Algorithms are already influencing what we see and access online, for example, Amazon's AI recruiting tool that showed a [bias against women](#).

#### Key Theme 1 - Diversity and inclusion

*Whilst talking about the exclusionary aspect of algorithms Sharma addressed their impact on recruitment and facial recognition, and her own experiences of working as an Indian woman in a predominantly white, male field. The issue of diversity and inclusion has long been a problem for the library and information profession in the UK and the CILIP conference sought to address it.*

The technology and tools we have may change, but our attitude to how we do our jobs and relate to different communities does not (in some cases). Sharma asked how we are going to stay relevant, because AI will undoubtedly replace some jobs. The question for us is how do we train for human skills? How do we interact with each other? How do we communicate and elicit meaning from each other? One of the biggest skills of being an information professional is knowing how to build a connection with a user in order to fully gauge what it is that they need versus what they **think** they need (usually **not** the same thing). The opportunities we have lie in the interface between machines and humans; the interactions that as information professionals we are practicing already. This will increasingly become important as more jobs are automated (something we have experienced already in terms of checking out and returning books, for example).

Next, I took myself to a [health seminar](#) with Natasha Howard, Sue Lacey-Bryant and Nicole Naylor. The 2019 [Topol Review](#) places the work of clinical librarians around the country very much in the spotlight. Healthcare information is the foundation of good healthcare and the healthcare workforce needs to prepare to deliver a digital future. The following are a few quotes from the Review, which are very much in line with the general aims and objectives of K&IM.

*'NHS Boards should take responsibility for effective knowledge management to enable staff to learn from experience (both successes and failures) and accelerate the adoption of proven innovations.'*

*'The NHS should increase the overall numbers of clinicians, as well as scientists, technologists and knowledge specialist posts, with dedicated, accredited time to keep their skills up to date and with the opportunity to work in partnership with academia and/or the health tech industry on the design, implementation and use of digital, AI and robotics technologies.'*

*'Effective knowledge management is essential to enable the spread and adoption of innovation, with lessons from early adoption shared widely: an innovation culture is dependent on a learning culture. The NHS must build a reputation as a learning organisation that values and enables the transfer of learning about successes and failures. This can only happen with the creation of new senior knowledge management roles.'*

## Key Theme 2 - How do we prepare for a digital future?

*What will our roles look like in ten years' time? Lacey-Bryant asked us this question and while this is something that is often asked, it's not very often that you're given the space and tools to reflect on this. The NHS is pioneering new AI technology; teleconferencing to deal with conditions. How do we, as K&IM professionals support this?*

In an era of fake news and in a country where 61% of the working age population in the UK struggles with health literacy - understanding how to manage long term conditions or how to engage with preventive programmes - there is a gap for us across the profession to put our skills to work. This is not just about helping create patient information leaflets or doing literature searches to support research. We have work to do in showing how embedding our skills can contribute to patient care and ensure that clinicians are aware of how much we can help them (and more importantly help them save time!).

Like the keynote, Lacey-Bryant prompted us to discover where the opportunities lie for working, but also what the implications will be. Evidence-based medicine is the cornerstone of good medical practice and seeing it aligned to K&IM is something that will only enable better care for patients. Following on from this, Lacey-Bryant asked us more questions. Why are there so many library management systems? Why do different NHS libraries use different systems? How do we release capacity to enable more patient centred care? How do we ensure that the information that Trusts provide is quality information that can be signposted to patients with the guarantee of reliability?

Perhaps my favourite session on day one was '[Information Management](#)' with Arthur Robbins (Roche Products), Aimee Reed (Metropolitan Police) and Sian Tyrell (Royal Horticultural Society): three people working in very different organisations; all working with information.

*'If you are part of a small information team in a large organisation, it can be difficult to get your impact recognised by senior managers.'* Arthur Robbins, Library, Information & Knowledge Services Manager, Roche Products Ltd

This session brought together the themes of the conference for me; from the importance of diversity and inclusion, to how do we construct our services and how are we preparing for the future. Reed's comments about 'information as a strategic asset' have stayed with me. Robbins' 'make everyone self-sufficient' really brought home how the landscape of K&IM has changed. We're here as a profession to facilitate understanding of K&IM for our service users so that they can utilise

the benefits for themselves and their teams. By doing this, K&IM becomes a part of daily working life and not simply a 'nice to have'.

*'Metropolitan Police Service are thinking differently about data and information management to prevent, predict and solve crimes and criminality. Good policing decisions require good data, this session will explain how we will become data-driven.'* Aimee Reed, Director of Data, Information & Insight, Metropolitan Police

Learning about the Met police's relationship with data was interesting, worrying and hopeful all at the same time. The force is primarily shifting its focus to the quality of the data they collect and how that data can keep people safe and be managed effectively to enable officers across the force to be more informed. Reed focussed on the importance of 'good data habits.' Officers on the beat, for example, must be able to act confidently upon accurate data to make often critical decisions. Each speaker referenced the importance of the support of senior management and how one of the keys to successful K&IM was to *speak the language of your business*. Reed concluded with some clear pointers:

- Be agile [small experiments show value]
- Be persistent [Link compliance and operational delivery - makes it easier for senior management to understand]
- Be relevant [All data and information change are cultural]

## Day Two

*'There is a growing conversation around the need for greater diversity, representation and inclusivity in the library and information sector.'* Hong-Anh Nguyen, Information Services Manager, The King's Fund

Hong-Anh Nguyen opened day two with an incredibly insightful keynote - [Questioning Diversity](#) - one of the key themes of the conference. It encouraged delegates to look at ways they could work towards more inclusive work environments.

### Key Theme 3 - Who is our service for?

*Our users are our partners not our children. How are we running our services? Are they inclusive of all aspects of the community we serve, or the parts that we know best and are more familiar with? Libraries do not exist in a bubble and we need to be fully present in the communities and organisations we serve.*

The oft-cited statistic that the library and information profession is 97% white still has the power to shock, but we are used to hearing strategies more than action. Nguyen used some excellent examples to show how small changes can contribute to larger change, for example, [Ed Yong at The Atlantic](#) who addressed the issue of gender imbalance in scientific writing and the media. How do you fix gender inequality in people who contribute to science articles? With a spreadsheet and data collected over time of course! Nguyen reminded us that white and male tends to be accepted as the universal experience. How does that carry over in the way that we work and how we develop services within our communities? Are we doing the best that we can, or are we doing what we have always done because it seems to work?



*‘Librarians, as with many other professions in a time of rapid change, have been attempting to redefine their role in society. The larger effect has been that we broaden the scope of our remit “information and knowledge professionals” while attempting to retain a core of competencies and professional education oriented around the publication and the collection. This can lead to a tension between how we are formed professionally, and what we find ourselves doing in practice. Do we even have a consistent and coherent professional identity anymore?’ Patrick Lambe, Straits Knowledge, pictured here with Natasha Chowdory.*

[Patrick Lambe](#) presented the second keynote of the day about knowledge in society and our role in it. He later co-hosted a session on [‘KM and the ISO Standard’](#). Lambe has long been an icon of mine. In my first role as a librarian at Microsoft his book ‘Organising Knowledge: Taxonomies, Knowledge and Organisational Effectiveness’ was my bible. It helped me to forge my identity as a special librarian/information professional beyond ‘librarian’. It was an incredible honour to meet him.

The most interesting aspect of this session was all the different interpretations of Knowledge Management. KM seems to break its own rules through every lifecycle in every organisation! Lambe guided delegates through the difference between a ‘guide’, ‘standard’ and ‘good practice.’ In his presentation ‘Fractious, Fickle and Forgetful: Why We Need a Knowledge Management Standard’ it was noted: ‘The discipline of knowledge management is a poor representative of the ideals that it serves. Since its rise to prominence in the 1990s, it has displayed a strong silo-mentality with multiple competing languages and schools of thought, it is chronically forgetful of its own past, and it is better at chasing new fads than it is at consolidating its own collective knowledge.’

The differences and tensions between KM terminology and concepts were a common thread. Judy Payne, Director of Hemdean Consulting, commented that everyone should agree on an accurate definition of knowledge management first before trying to gain consensus on any type of standard that you want to apply globally. A key takeaway was around the question of *Does culture or governance come first?* If you’re in the UK it will be culture, if you’re in Germany, it will be governance. Chris J. Collison, co-author of ‘The KM Cookbook’ (Facet Publishing 2019, with Paul J. Corney and Patricia Lee Eng) took ‘a metaphorical romp through ISO 30401 using the medium of restaurants, chefs, staff, ingredients, food critics and restaurateurs.’ He hoped the publication would help information professionals to reframe how knowledge management is built, created and managed. (‘What is the new “kitchen” that the standard provides us with, and how can we cook something to delight our organisations?’) A Knowledge Manager should above all be a skilled facilitator, if only to manage all the needs and expectations of everybody in the room!

## **Final Thoughts**

The CILIP Conference 2019 provided an incredible opportunity for me to meet fellow professionals, and to engage with where the profession is now and where it might be going in the future. The future is the most valuable to me, because I want to help shape that. In some ways the profession lags behind other industries in the UK, in terms of horizon scanning and how we adapt to change. Ultimately, the message I took away with me was one of willingness to engage more effectively with our communities and the importance that K&IM plays in all aspects of our roles as information

professionals. Special thanks to John Wickenden (Hon. Secretary UKeiG) for his guidance at the conference, and all those involved with UKeiG for the opportunity to attend.

(Please note: The editor has supplemented the text with some enlightening quotes from the CILIP Conference programme in order to underpin some of the arising themes from the two day event.)