

Rewired – changing digital landscapes

CILIP's second Rewired conference took place in November, offering delegates a chance to take a deeper look at the tech and digital innovations that are increasingly providing solutions and challenges to the profession. **Gary Horrocks** of UKeig gives us his take on this year's event.

CILIP's digital transformation Conference, Rewired, took place in London and provided an inspiring opportunity for professionals from all sectors to converge on the capital to explore digital solutions to managing data, information and knowledge and experience creativity and innovation in digital technology.

An open, trustworthy data ecosystem

The keynote on data stewardship and building a National Data Library was presented by Emma Thwaites from the Open Data Institute. The ODI's vision is "a world where data works for everyone". Its mission is "an open, trustworthy data ecosystem". Unlocking the full value of public data assets will be a key driver for growth for the economy, government, industry, research and society. She referenced World Wide Web creator Sir Tim Berners-Lee's vision for a bright future sharing open data, driving innovation, and empowering citizens through data literacy. Emma articulated a data spectrum embracing "small, medium and big data"; personal, commercial and governmental.

Many people still struggle with interpreting the social value of data and have an acute mistrust of its security and integrity. OpenSAFELY, a "transparent, open-source software platform for analysis of electronic health records data" is a great example of an initiative where "all platform activity is publicly logged. All code for data management and analysis is shared, under open licenses and by default, for scientific review and efficient re-use".



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Old wine in new bottles?

AI will play a major role in the future of data management, and the library, information and knowledge sector is well placed to seize the initiative in this area.

Rewired showcased the launch of a major AI survey that will ascertain a clearer picture of how the information profession is adjusting to another disruptive technology. I reiterate 'another' because we've been here before. CD-ROM in the 1980's. The World Wide Web in the 1990s. Isn't AI just another enabling technology? The same old wine presented in a new bottle? A key mantra from the event was that "AI is a tool like any other tool" offering significant opportunities to reduce the administrative bureaucracy of day-to-day "grunt work" to focus on service enhancement.

Olly Hellis, Digital Development Officer at Somerset Libraries presented on AI as a way to "revolutionise the library experience" with

time-saving efficiencies. He noted: “Using AI in libraries can improve the user experience by providing personalised recommendations to users based on their borrowing history and preferences.”

It can increase efficiency by helping libraries “automate routine tasks such as the cataloguing and processing of books, freeing up staff time to focus on more important tasks”. One notable example flagged up during the event was Hannes Lowagie’s insights on “adventures in AI and metadata” and the AI automation of subject indexing and bibliographic data extraction.

The use of interactive generative AI chatbots based on large language models is embedded in day-to-day life now. Virtual assistant Microsoft Copilot is fast becoming everybody’s AI companion. Olly cited its use in generating royalty free images and he closed his PowerPoint presentation by announcing that it had been created by the tool.

Experience from the legal and health care sectors provided prime examples that little has really changed since the 1990s. I contributed three chapters to a biomedical research textbook back in 1997 when the profession was eagerly trying to tame the anarchy of the web, organising and cataloguing high quality web content. I cited Ed Kroll’s assertion in *The Whole Internet* (1994) that web exploration was like handling jelly: “The more firm you think your grip is the more it oozes down your arm.”

AI is driving efficiency now, but the fundamental tenets of the library and information profession are the same – the absolute importance of information currency, integrity, provenance and the peer review and critical appraisal of retrieved outputs. Generative AI can eliminate the tedious aspects of information retrieval, but it falls flat on its face in terms of judgment or wisdom. “It can create hallucinations and non-sense” was a key message.

In law it has huge potential for summarisation, contract/document review, external legal and knowledge research, meeting transcription/notetaking and translation. In health it can support evidence-based medicine, systematic reviews and literature searching but human intervention is required to detect inaccuracies and misinformation. “80 per cent accuracy doesn’t work in law” was a key message I took away with me. Nor in medicine.

Comprehensive retrieval of information, very often deep web based and behind paywalls, is crucial in both sectors, and there is little transparency of the resources mined by AI tools. The key quote from the event was “IA before AI” (Information architecture before



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generative artificial intelligence). IA in the legal sector embraces access to high quality data and information, subject experts and rigorous information governance. In the final analysis we are here to improve the user experience, to construct intuitive information architecture and ensure data and information ethics alongside effective information governance are adhered to.

Digital divide

The irony of living in an information intensive age is four out of ten households with children still don’t have the basic digital living standards and access to IT. Supporting digital literacy, encouraging confidence in AI and helping develop critical thinking is crucial. Online safety is an omnipresent threat. Closing the digital divide is a key aspect of government policy and data and evidence will help shape public services. The Good Things Foundation is working to “Fix the Digital Divide” defining a Minimal Digital Living Standard that includes “accessible internet, adequate equipment and the skills and knowledge people need”. They have identified key functional and practical skills including using digital devices, apps and the Internet; engaging and interacting online, managing and monitoring digital



CILIP CEO Louis Coiffait-Gunn.

devices, online security and sharing and receiving information.

Our changing digital landscape

Our changing digital landscape is underpinned by the need to create a robust, high quality, transparent and trustworthy data, information and knowledge sharing infrastructure. Interoperability and the merging of different high-quality datasets will create social value and enrich the future, and we are all well placed to lead this transition. Shared Intelligence was commissioned by CILIP in summer 2023 to do some horizon scanning taking a “futures literacy” approach to help them work through how to respond to future trends and uncertainties. The worst-case scenario of “dystopian: technological over-reach” is grossly exaggerated. The future of digital technologies has huge opportunities to increase engagement, create a digitally enabled population and improve collaboration and accessibility to information.

Key concerns are the dearth of AI strategies, regulation, rights attribution and infringement, inaccuracy and misinformation. General advice from the event was always consult professional bodies for advice, select your AI tools carefully, disclose your use of AI to collaborators, clients and users and check outputs before using or publishing them, labelling your content as AI-generated. Dr Andrew Cox, University of Sheffield, has authored a key UKeiG paper – “Developing a library strategic response to Artificial Intelligence” – and is leading on CILIP’s AI survey (add your experience here www.cilip.org.uk/ai-survey).

It was heartening that CILIP Chief Executive Louis Coiffait-Gunn referenced UKeiG’s online professional development portfolio in his closing presentation, listing courses including AI, natural language processing, search usability and data visualisation. Visit the events and CPD section on the UKeiG web site for further information.

As devil’s advocate I’d like to end on a potentially controversial note. Is the age of Boolean logic dead? Have advanced information retrieval skills died a death? What about those of us who wish to jettison AI and stick to traditional search skills?

Plenty of food for thought for one day.

Links

- <https://theodi.org/>
- www.opensafely.org/
- www.goodthingsfoundation.org/
- <https://sharedintelligence.net/>
- *Developing a library strategic response to Artificial Intelligence* <https://elucidate-ukeig.org.uk/index.php/elucidate>

CILIP’s AI hub is available from the website www.cilip.org.uk/page/AI. **IP**