

# Leadership, intellectual freedom and looking to the future

## A personal reflection on the CILIP 2024 Conference

Katherine Barrowman is the Collections Librarian (Serials) at the University of Wolverhampton

K.Barrowman@wlv.ac.uk

This was the first conference I've attended in the library world. Since lockdown I'd realised that I wanted to be a librarian, and I committed to the career by starting my diploma. I threw myself full speed into my learning, aiming to complete it as soon as possible. The stars aligned, and I both completed my diploma and started my current role as Collections Librarian for journals at the University of Wolverhampton. I'd read the books and written the essays, but now I was looking at more hands-on opportunities to build on my knowledge and develop more connections.

With this in mind, I found myself heading off to the 2024 CILIP conference, a notebook in hand, my eyes open for networking opportunities and grateful to UKeiG for funding my place.

### First impressions

The first morning I arrived I was welcomed into the exhibition area with a wealth of displays showcasing a variety of products. Publishers sat alongside library furniture producers who sat beside technological providers. Over the two days, I managed to stop by most stalls and ingested a lot of information (and a lot of free handouts: six notebooks, ten pens, three different sets of stickers and a mug). It was an impressive haul that I had not prepared for before my trip and I had to acquire an additional tote bag to carry it all.

My main complaint about the event (if it even is a complaint) was the size. Other than the keynotes, there were three simultaneous talks per session as the conference sprawled across the ground floor of the Birmingham Hilton Metropole and there were several slots where I was torn between parallel talks. While I was disappointed that I couldn't be in two places at once, I did find that it sparked conversation. There was a group of delegates who would split and go to our separate sessions and then reconvene between presentations and relay what we'd learnt. It was an excellent way to *recon* the whole conference in a sense, and I enjoyed the variety of opinions that came up just among our informal group. None of us had known each other before attending, yet we had managed to converge and congregate and have fun with it all. If nothing had sunk in from the many talks I attended, I did leave feeling confident that I knew more fellow librarians than I had when I'd first arrived at the conference.

There were three main themes behind the talks I did attend: intellectual freedom (the stated theme of the conference), looking to the future, and leadership. I've tried to cluster the sessions into those themes for this article.

## Intellectual freedom

The overarching theme of the conference was intellectual freedom and both the keynotes on the first day dived headfirst into the topic. The [Director of English PEN](#), Daniel Gorman, opened the conference proclaiming the power of books and the importance of libraries as the intersection between books and people, and people and each other. Delving into the topic of how to house conflicting ideas without calling up issues of censorship, the talk was certainly thought provoking and my main take away was that we need to make sure we're talking about it; both to patrons to keep the dialogue open and to each other for support and sharing ideas. Afterall, what's the point in curating knowledge if we don't try to share it with one another?

The lunchtime keynote was similarly eye-opening for me. It discussed '*Truth Decay*' - the concept that there is a system with drivers, consequences and feedback loops that is causing the increasing spread of misinformation and distrust of previously trustworthy news sources, causing some people to deny true facts and data about the world. Drawing on previous work on truth decay in the States, Stijn Hoorens from Rand Europe talked about how the process had started to take hold in Europe and went through the drivers of the trend. It was a fascinating talk that ended on an optimistic note. We have ways to slow down and perhaps even reverse some of the trends, and one of those routes was through librarians providing media literacy and acting as that intersection between people and books that Gorman had talked about.

In between the keynotes, I attended the panel discussion, *Intellectual Freedom in the Age of Post-Neutrality*. The speakers agreed that neutrality was both a hard concept to pin down and an even harder concept to apply in real life. I was particularly taken by Asif Khan's point that neutrality is not an absolute stance. One person's vision of neutral versus advocacy rarely matches another. The discussion was lively and while none of the panel provided definitive answers (and I'm not sure they could have if they tried), they certainly packed many discussion points into a less than hour-long talk. My primary takeaway again was the need to keep communication open with our patrons and each other. It is one of the best ways to navigate the minefield of intellectual freedom. Louise Cooke's argument that we need to reflect on each issue and take them on a case-by-case basis due to the real-world element that theories and overarching rules can rarely capture, is one that will stay with me.

The final keynote that closed out the conference on Thursday brought back several of the points raised during the panel discussion. It was about *inclusive collections*, which can often be battlegrounds in debates over intellectual freedom. I was especially interested in Amy Staniforth's work with the Welsh government to decolonialise library catalogues (and not

just because of my Welsh roots). She told us of the need to invest in the technical and metadata side of libraries but also the need to balance it with where books were shelved or displayed in the library and in raising community engagement. An example she gave was of an academic upset to discover that a book they had requested on the history of a much-stereotyped country was catalogued in a way that placed it between books that highlighted drugs and crime in a way that the academic felt perpetuated negative stereotypes. After investigating, the librarians had to return to the academic and explain that in terms of the classification the book was in the right place, but the surroundings were a problem, and that perhaps the academic could suggest other books on the country to fill out the section more, and to make the pro-active choice to build a more nuanced collection rather than to hide away the other books. I felt it really demonstrated the value of conversations that previous speakers had raised and really brought together the overarching theme of the whole conference.

## Looking to the future

The second talk I attended that first morning was on *AI and Digital Humanities*. As an academic librarian and once-history-student, this piqued my interest. The talk was shared by three presenters from the British Library, University of Manchester, and the [IIIF](#), all sharing their experiences with utilising AI in their libraries. I am personally still sceptical about AI and feel that the hype far exceeds its current capabilities, but this session did soften my stance a little hearing how each institution had made use of different AI applications. There are still kinks to figure out - each institution had put in substantial work with their AI schemes that won't be easily replicable by everyone out there, and during the Q&A session there was serious discussion about ensuring that students have appropriate media literacy and research skills in place so that they know how to best use AI and retain awareness that AI is not a universal solution. (It is after all still built on biased systems and is far more likely to replicate and strengthen those biases than rise above them). However, I am more optimistic that there are some uses that AI can do in libraries without undermining the reliability and trustworthiness of information that libraries cultivate.

Approaching the future from a different perspective, a session I attended was *Libraries Change Lives*, discussing active advocacy with governing bodies. I found the 'Blank Page' project from Suffolk libraries utterly fascinating in how it provided free creative sessions to teens and the knock-on effects that had on both the patrons and staff in their confidence. The presenter argued that projects like this supported policy goals in more areas than simply 'libraries' and could be used as supporting evidence in advocacy. Following that was a talk from Inflect about advocacy with the government that I felt in some ways had been undermined by the timing of the election. While in some ways it was exciting that we now have a new government in place who had explicitly stated that they wanted to work with experts in their manifesto, the talk felt more like a rehashing of the BBC presentations on who had lost their seats and who had gained them and by the time of the conference

Starmer still hadn't appointed a libraries minister who would have been most relevant to the talk. They ended with word of an upcoming advocacy toolkit which I wished they had focused more of their talk on than simply the make-up of the new parliament.

On Thursday, I attended the session *Evidence informed practice* that discussed the findings of a project launched last year looking at the relationship between library professionals and research. The overall findings were that librarians are generally in favour of doing research within the profession but are rarely doing it due to many barriers including issues with time, funding, ethics and the question of when something would count as research. Did it only count if you went on to publish it or present it at a conference? Or if you experimented with new projects, did that count as proper research? It reminded me of the 'Blank Pages' project and the various AI schemes which were experimental and looking at improving library practices – but did they count as evidence-based practice if they presented it but never published it?

## Leadership and skills

Janet Peden from the University of Ulster set off Thursday with her keynote speech about her experience with creating a new library strategy, working with a refurbishment project, and introducing new paradigms. As another academic librarian, I really enjoyed her point of view that libraries should be considered as partners with the university - not simply supporting students and reacting to course requests from lecturers but rather working with them proactively on an equal footing in course design to achieve the best possible outcomes. While I am far away from being in a position in my career to act on Peden's advice, it is an approach that I think I will hold onto as a potential way forward.

Immediately following the keynote speech was *Getting Match-fit for a Senior Leadership Role*, the session I was most looking forward to going into the conference. I was eager to get insights and directions to work towards as I build my career, and I was not disappointed. I found both speakers - Regina Everitt and Louise Goswami - really inspiring as they talked about their careers. Everitt focused on managing her team in the transition to lockdown in 2020 and working in a digital landscape, often touted as harder than in-person offices. Everitt really underlined the importance of trust in your team, and empowering your team to take risks, speak up, and having the space to fail. Once again, we saw the importance of open communication between colleagues. She highlighted that in a digital environment it is crucial to collaborate with IT rather than rely on them. Being involved in your own systems, being able to run them, talk about them, and advocate for them is a key skill when IT is managing myriads of systems; that your essential technology might fall through the cracks and lead to avoidable down time if you and your team don't take a hands-on approach to the technology.

Goswami's talk focused on her career as a whole; offering words of wisdom about how real life isn't always a straight line, and not to be dispirited if you have to take a sideways or even

backwards step occasionally. She emphasised the need to diversify your skills and to think about what you learnt from each role and could use to apply in the future. Her points on thinking holistically about your skillset and experiences were one of my main takeaways and between both speakers I felt like I learnt a lot from this one session for me personally. Both Everitt and Goswami were compelling speakers; by combining their lived experience and real-life examples with leadership concepts, the concepts have sunk in a lot better than they had when I'd simply read them in a textbook. This session was a highlight of the conference for me.

Over the two days I attended two different workshops: Ben Lee's *Library Futures* and Janine Weightman's *Creatively Languageing the value of KM in your Organisation*. I found it useful to be going over some practical skills that I hadn't used before. I thought both supplemented the other talks at the conference on advocacy by improving individuals' skills in such areas. I feel this was all tied together personally by a discussion with the CILIP representatives at the conference and I am looking towards making a start on my pursuit of chartership with CILIP. I fully intend to use all that I have learnt from the Everitt, Goswami, Lee and Weightman over these two days.

## Final thoughts

I enjoyed the conference immensely. I found it highly thought provoking (as you can tell if you made it this far). But ultimately, I have one main takeaway from the whole event: we need to maintain regular communication as librarians - both with each other and our readers and communities. There are very few concrete solutions or universal rules in the real world and the way we navigate most issues - whether it's intellectual freedom, implementing new technologies, advocating for our profession, or working within the workplace - requires constant discussion and reassessment based on the circumstances and changing needs and challenges that come along with that. I'm also feeling confident, with an exponentially larger network of library connections, that I can now be a part of that conversation.