Opportunities, threats, shared values and ethical considerations

A personal reflection on the 2023 CILIP Conference

Carly Lockett is library supervisor at Queen Mary University of London

carly.lockett23@gmail.com

In 2023 I was lucky to be sponsored by UKeiG to attend the CILIP Conference in Birmingham. New to the profession, this was the first time I'd been given the opportunity to experience a major networking event. It was valuable to attend the presentations and get a feel for what is taking place across the wider sector. Several themes recurred for me throughout.

Unsurprisingly, AI was the dominant topic. Most of the instances where it was discussed were free of the fearmongering I've seen elsewhere and provided balanced views on the capabilities of AI for information professionals, alongside awareness of potential threats and ethical considerations. I found it useful to hear about these topics in a library-specific context. All the speakers explained the complexities of various types of AI in an accessible way.

Rebecka Isaksson (transparent about her past employment with Microsoft) touched upon a theme in these discussions: that it is not worth ignoring these developments, but instead to be aware of AI's strengths and limitations, developing principles concerning their use. She provided a terminology overview which was a great starting point for those of us who wanted to have a good foundation of knowledge before weighing in on where to go next with using AI in the workplace. Isaksson was overwhelmingly positive about the way that the combination of human skill and AI reduces mistakes, adding that although humans have a lower margin of error than AI, the combination of the two has the smallest margin of error in completing tasks.

I found Dr Andrew Cox's observations about AI developments the most insightful and balanced, and appreciated that he noted deficiencies in 'AI optimism' in the workplace. Although I sometimes felt out of place at the conference due to the high number of managers in comparison with new professionals, it was nice to see people note the disparity in the attitudes to technological developments, and in general, among staff in libraries. Dr Cox was also a helpful voice in moderating the intensity of the discussion around the topic by noting how Generative AI was already present in our lives, such as in predictive texts on our phones.

I was encouraged after attending the many AI-centric talks to investigate popular forms of Generative AI such as ChatGPT and will begin to use it for simple tasks in my work life in order to understand what it is and how others use it. Aaron Tay also acknowledged the existence of emerging academic Generative AI alternatives, such as Elicit.org and [ResearchRabbit.ai.](ResearchRabbit.ai)

One familiar sentiment echoing throughout the conference was the idea that libraries have struggled in the past to adapt to disruptive tools and technologies like Google or Wikipedia. There has been an unwillingness to investigate these innovations early on; instead, warning users against using them for research rather than considering their uses and incorporating them into work practices. A different approach needs to be taken with AI. Rather than putting students off using these resources, we should advocate using them as a tertiary source and a starting point for acquainting yourself with a subject and its associated terminology. ChatGPT should be used in the same way. A friend of mine at the conference pointed out that shifting our terminology when discussing AI could help mitigate this: for example not solely using the term 'intelligence' (which it arguably does not have) but reminding our users that it is composed of algorithms intended to consume and repurpose information to create something new. Aaron Tay explained this issue in detail during the discussion panel on day one of the conference. This explained an interaction I had with a student at the library desk shortly after ChatGPT was released. We puzzled over why we could not locate an article it had cited that was 'perfect' for their dissertation. It had combined real authors and a real journal with a title cobbled together based on the student's research question that did not exist. Months on, with a better understanding of what ChatGPT does, I know that it was simply doing its job: creating what the student wanted to find. I will be better able to explain that to library users from now on.

On the second day of the conference Nick Woolley made an insightful comment that asking if AI will end or save humanity is a 'false dichotomy.' This stood out for me amidst all the panic surrounding the capabilities of Generative AI. The question is how to adapt to it, but to remind ourselves and others of its limitations. We should not attribute too much emphasis on it 'replacing' us. This is not to say that a plethora of aspects of Generative AI (many of which were dissected thoughtfully throughout the panel discussion) aren't concerning. The idea that we can only either completely resist engaging with new technologies or fully submit to their dominance doesn't seem like an accurate depiction of the situation. As pointed out many times, information literacy is an integral part of librarianship, so if anything, this is our time to value this skill, apply it well, and teach it to our users.

Evident in every presentation or panel discussion I attended at the conference was the theme that the library and information profession's skills set should be based on shared values and ethics. So many aspects of the conference emphasised 'lived ethics' within the profession (as noted by CILIP CEO Nick Poole).

Certain values such as equity of access to quality information were echoed throughout the conference. Topics including e-book licensing and good academic practice were discussed in sessions including 'Digital Content - The Way Ahead.' How are projects such as the e-book pledge addressing challenges in libraries? Attending the conference and engaging in discussions about the fundamental ethical cornerstones of librarianship affirmed my career choice, encouraging me to tackle any issues that may arise in the future with this perspective.

Another key issue that arose during the conference was the need to ensure visibility and promote the organisational value of library and information work. The 'Evidence and Impact' session on day two evidenced how librarians feel a strong pressure to demonstrate their worth - particularly in terms of financial value and return on investment. While staff at the London Library and Suffolk public libraries managed to lead projects demonstrating this to the best of their ability, it was acknowledged by many of us at the end of the conference discussion that we constantly feel the need to defend and prove our value, which is of course demoralising. The discussion after this session revealed to me the varying priorities of maintaining library visibility. We should all speak more loudly about our work and talk to people about the value of libraries, encouraging them to use our resource and services.

The 2023 CILIP conference gave me a boost and returning to work I felt more connected to the UK library world. I met wonderful, enthusiastic information professionals, and was encouraged by CILIP's focus on leadership, change, growth and recognising new professionals. I have been inspired to become more active in how my workplace instructs students in responsibly using AI in their research practices and reaffirmed the centrality of supporting information literacy. I have decided that no matter what kind developments are ahead, there is a strong bank of shared ethical principles I can turn to when things become uncertain. The conference was a valuable experience for me, and I thank UKeiG for enabling me to attend.