

Conference Report

LILAC 2025: Sleepless in Cardiff

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This report started as the need to write some thoughts down during the nights I was unable to sleep while visiting Cardiff for the Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC) which took place from 14th–16th April 2025. I blame it all on the presenters whose inspiring presentations would not allow me to unwind at night.

LILAC turned 20 this year. It was only my second time here. I was out of the profession for about a decade (until about 10 years ago) and then it was not easy to find the funding to attend, given the current state of Higher Education funding. This year, the necessity to stand up for truth, against mis- and disinformation could be identified as one of the main strands or, at least, one of the ones I chose to follow. I am convinced that democracy cannot survive the attack it is under without people, young and old, all of us educating ourselves and others to become information literate. To me, this includes critical media literacy, data literacy, artificial intelligence (AI) and digital literacy because all of these have commonalities that make it clear one cannot be achieved without the others. I see the critical thinking that information literacy (IL) employs as one of the main ways out of the web of lies, propaganda, bias and polarisation we are constantly subjected to online, on social media, in AI use, on television and in newspapers. Day by day, it is only getting harder to discern deepfake from reality, made up 'facts' from real facts, easier to fall prey to politicians' manipulation of statistics, easier for all of us to feel that it is safe enough to hand out our personal data to tech giants to exploit in exchange for 'free' access to their social networking sites and other so called free services, giving it away so that they can profit. And let's be honest...who has never inadvertently shared something that later turned out to be fake news in a moment of pure outrage at seeing the clickbait headlines? Proclamations of political figures that they work for *us* and not the elites, appealing to nationalist feelings, making immigrants look like villains and viewing them as *the* main societal problem to detract from the real ones, purporting to care about family values when some of their own behaviour shows the opposite, borrowing tactics from other successful populist political winners to manipulate their own country electorate into believing that, once in power, *they* are the only ones who care and

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can make things infinitely better for the working classes. I would argue these are some of the problems an information literate citizen would be able to see through more easily. It is very easy to believe misinformation, it happens all the time, sometimes even to some of us who know better.

IL “empowers us as citizens to develop informed views and to engage fully with society” (CILIP, 2018) and this is why librarians and information professionals have a vital role to play in society. However, we need to help each other develop our own IL skills to teach others and LILAC is focused on exactly these skills.

The keynote delivered by the inspiring Dr Jane Secker (one of the amazing people who came up with the idea of this conference two decades ago together with Debbi Boden-Angell) made me well up for the things that this profession strives for every day and has continued to do so without hesitation because the peril is real. Her keynote speech reminded us of what it means to be a librarian if we ever lose sight. To me, the importance of this conference cannot be underestimated in the current climate and for the future of our profession and role in society.

Censorship of anything that somebody doesn't agree with, inventing an alternative reality that fits their purpose, resources being removed as a result of cost-cutting exercises, librarians trying to rescue online research collections from being removed, American colleagues who dare stand up to book bans and censorship being sacked, and having to move house for fear of their own family's safety from radicalised public library users, all are signs of the threat not just to our profession but to knowledge and, ultimately, democracy itself. While not quite *Fahrenheit 451*, it certainly seems to be going in that direction.

When you are attacked as a professional, you realise that the powers that be feel threatened by you and by what you represent. To be a librarian and to really believe and follow your professional ethical code, can indeed be a threat to power. To be a librarian who *cares* nowadays really does mean to become an activist, to be political. It is impossible not to. I know some colleagues who say we have to be neutral or appear to be so. While I agree with this to some degree, in terms of making resources available to users without censorship and letting them make up their own minds from what they read, teaching people to think critically of the information they consume is not a neutral act. It is an act of resistance in today's world.

One librarian who was presenting their research was saying they were too small and that the only power they had was here, at this conference. And yet they did great research which demonstrated exactly the opposite. This brought to mind a paraphrased quote often attributed to the Dalai Lama (who, in turn, is likely to have paraphrased an African Proverb) made into a song by my talented friend singer-songwriter and activist Penny Stone: “If you ever think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping in a room with a mosquito in!” (Stone, 2020).

The other keynote that was a highlight to me was Dr Elinor Carmi's, who describes herself as “a digital rights advocate, feminist, researcher and journalist” (City St George's, University of London, 2025). I was thrilled to hear at last someone who advises caution when dealing with generative AI and who urges the profession to be highly critical of its usefulness, both from an ethical and environmental point of view, points we seem to often forget about even if we do know them. I felt the same as soon as I started to learn about the impact using generative AI has on the environment and of all the other social justice and ethical issues that come with its use. The ultimate question an academic colleague of mine asked is *how can we use something*

that is inherently unethical in an ethical way? I think it would be difficult, if not impossible to do so, which is why I do not use it and do not encourage others to do so unless there is an obvious need that cannot be easily addressed in a different way.

Some audience members pointed out in one of the AI sessions, quite rightly in my view, that if you need to constantly check that what you are getting from generative AI is correct, you might as well do the work yourself. Although I see the possibilities for generative AI use in specific and limited circumstances, students using generative AI to do their work only makes them adept at using generative AI e.g. learning how to prompt. It does not enable them to gain skills in reading and comprehending books or articles if AI does the summary for them for example, or to develop other IL skills and competencies such as literature searching, critically appraising the resources generated by AI which, as we all know can be biased or fake. Students not doing their own reading, making notes and using what they find by themselves in their assignments should sound alarm bells to those of us working in education as these are the skills they should be learning at university. If not here and now, where and when?

And we did sing at LILAC! This might have been a first at this conference, I am not sure. One of the UK copyright gurus, Chris Morrison, was there with his guitar and lovely new song written especially for the occasion *This LILAC Song 2025* to finish Jane's keynote. We all joined in singing:

*And so we'll take this LILAC time
And through our love the truth will shine
Fill up your cup, hold out your hand
And even through our differences we'll seek to understand*

*And in a world where angry voices reign
With compassion we will educate
Ourselves
And our friends
And when we do
We will sing this LILAC song (Morrison, 2025)*

In solidarity with our colleagues everywhere where being a librarian is dangerous work.

References

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