

# Virtual Libraries and New Beginnings

2021 CILIP Ireland/LAI annual joint conference. 15-16th April 2021.

## Catherine Ahearne

The theme of the 2021 virtual conference was Virtual Libraries and New Beginnings. The conference highlighted how all sectors of the profession have not only risen to the challenge of COVID-19, but have also thrived.

Following a welcome from the CILIP Ireland chairperson Alex McIlroy, the first day's keynote speaker, Bobby Seagull (Public Libraries ambassador) discussed the impact of the library on the journey to lifelong learning. He noted that prior to the pandemic the library was seen primarily as a physical space for learning; with the move to the digital world the digital divide has been highlighted. He stressed the need to balance face to face and digital services when libraries fully reopen. There will be a need for digital options, and our public library spaces will continue to be essential to bridge the gaps in society. Following the keynote speaker, the Library Ireland Week Library Staff Champion Award 2021 was awarded to Maynooth University's Marie Cullen.

The *new voices* session covered a broad area. It was amazing to hear of the achievements during what had been a challenging year for many. Daniel McGrath from Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Library Service (DLR) discussed how the Covid-19 pandemic is accelerating digitising the public libraries. With the physical space closed to the public the need to enhance user's digital literacy became a priority, with the 'getting the most from your library card' initiative and podcast explaining how to utilise the library to its full potential. Emma Rothwell talked about moving to the library sector from the teaching profession with her studentship with the National Library of Ireland (NLI). Niamh O'Brien spoke of Plan S, part of the international drive for Open Access. We were then taken on a 360-degree tour of Munster Technological University (MTU) by Adrian Vaughan.

The afternoon discussions, led by Ricardo Castellinin da Silva (MediaAware) and Alan Carbery (UCC) covered media literacy and misinformation. They discussed the impact the internet has had on this and how it has come to be perceived as a digital/technical issue rather than an information literacy issue. Media literacy should be tackled with an integrated approach. Technical skills are important but a critical approach to media content is also needed. Information literacy is not just a checklist list for fake news - context matters as does taking a critical approach so we can confront our biases. Information literacy does not start and end at the library - we do not "own" it but we are ambassadors. Individual responsibility needs to come to the fore.

Day one closed with FactCheck Northern Ireland's Orna Young. This is a non-profit organisation run by researchers, who encourage people to question information. Orna made an interesting point about conspiracy theories being born from fear.

Marion Higgins, President of the LAI opened the second and final day. The keynote speaker was Stuart Hamilton, Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) with his talk titled "We've been there but do we want to go back again." Stewart noted that the growth of the public sector libraries has been unrepresented during Lockdown. He stressed the need to use the

learnings from the last 12 months, to inform our practice going forward. We need to keep and encourage new types of users, while retaining our existing users. Moving forward we need to demonstrate our space is safe and keep the new workflows that we have implemented that work best for our users.

The *response to Covid* session covered public, health and management of libraries. Sinead O'Higgins (Waterford County Council) and Trisha Ward (Libraries Northern Ireland) covered the managing of the public libraries across the island of Ireland. Moving outreach events online offers real opportunities for partners & audience to make connections but these are dependent on those who have access. Aoife Lawton of the HSE (Health Service Executive) spoke about supporting frontline staff during the pandemic. Siobhan Stevenson (University of Toronto) discussed library management during a global pandemic. A survey of public library staff discovered the mood of those working on the front line. Fear and/or anticipation anxiety conflicted with their desire to provide the best service to the user. Emma Horgan (UCC) and Marion Khorshidian (Ulster University) closed out the conference with a discussion on sustainable libraries.

Key points of the conference were that libraries are about people, our staff as well as our users. The pandemic has shown the adaptability, empathy, knowledge, and desire to help of library staff. Going forward, we need to consider how we provide and balance our services across the digital/physical space, and our responsibility in terms of tackling information literacy. Libraries should be places that unite people in curiosity and places to share knowledge.

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