



GLOBAL VISION DISCUSSION

Report of the Rare Books and Special Collections Section meeting

How a united library field can tackle the challenges of the future

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Contributors

This report is created by:

Daryl Green
Beth Kilmarx
Krister Östlund
Mohamed Soliman
Tan Huism
Helen Vincent
Bettina Wagner

Index

Contributors	2
Index	2
Introduction	3
A vision for libraries	3
The core values of libraries (Q4):	3
Libraries are exceptionally good at (Q5):	4
Libraries should do more of (Q6):	5
Libraries should do less of (Q7):	6
Challenges and solutions	6
The main challenges to society (Q8):	6
The main challenges to libraries (Q9):	7
The main professional challenges (Q10):	8
How a united library field can make a difference	9
How should a united library field help meet the challenges identified (Q11)?	9
The characteristics of a united library field (Q12):	9
The focus of a united library field (Q13):	10
A global conversation	11

Introduction

On 22 June to 9 July 2017, seven librarians participated in a conversation about how a united library field can tackle the challenges of the future. Together we represent 132 years of library experience.

The participants were from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America and represent academic, state and national libraries. Some work in libraries and with collections which have existed for over five hundred years, while others are in institutions which came into being in the second half of the 20th century.

The participants were interested in both the challenges and issues facing the world and the library sector as a whole and also in our own Section's specialist area – as people who work with rare books and special collections we have a particular focus on cultural heritage and how libraries preserve cultural heritage materials and make them accessible, and this is reflected in the report below.

The opinions expressed here were given in cyberspace and not in one physical location at one time.

A vision for libraries

Libraries enable literate, informed and participative societies. When we look at the future, according to the debates, this means that libraries are authoritative and trustworthy sources of information open to all, providing that information in a joined-up and accessible way online as much as through their physical spaces. To make this vision a reality, librarians find a way of uniting in their commitment to providing these things, however diverse the ways in which they make them happen may be. Libraries are stewards of information and collections, and preserve and advocate for cultural heritage but also for the freedom of intellectual enquiry and the development of and access to the knowledge and culture of the world.

The core values of libraries (Q4):

1. *Openness and accessibility*
2. *Professionalism – expertise and integrity*
3. *Equality/Diversity*
4. *Intellectual Freedom*
5. *Stewardship*

Comments:

'Openness' was the most common word people used to describe a core value and it seems that a lot of our other core values flow from that some of the other words used relate to that – openness of buildings, collections and information (accessibility, diversity). Also related to that is the openness of minds, worded here as 'intellectual freedom' - other terms used were 'freedom of enquiry' and 'encouraging ideas'. In a world where for economic and ideological reasons people's access to information and ideas can be restricted, our Section places openness at the heart of what a library does. The interesting question is how we in the Rare Books and Special Collections Section as professionals can honour that commitment in practice, working with collections to which there are

barriers to access, sometimes essential for the preservation of those collections or respect for the intellectual property, cultural traditions or right to privacy of their creators.

The second core value to highlight is 'equality/diversity'. Another person worded this as 'democracy'. Perhaps this is where the emphasis shifts depending on the environment in which one is working – for some people the work is to provide equal access for all, for others it is to deal with particular groups who have been excluded from access, more actively bring them into our sphere and give them additional access.

The third is 'stewardship': for us this is specifically focused on the stewardship of our cultural heritage collections but also more generally being custodians of cultural heritage and information. The word 'stewardship' here allows this commitment to preserving and providing access to original materials – but also implies a broader responsible custodianship of culture, knowledge and information – which may include de-accessioning or providing alternative access as well as preserving.

The other value which attracted a lot of comments is summarised here as 'professionalism'. A recurring theme in our responses throughout this report is that people want to think about not just 'information' or 'services' – the things we provide – but also ourselves as a profession and what that means. We are not just people interested in the information business but people who see ourselves as working within a profession with the responsibility to embody something – as the questions went on, this became more explicit in people's responses. It matters that our profession exists and that those who work in it are committed to providing trustworthy and accurate information, to preserving the body of knowledge and having the skills to use and search it.

One value which did not, in the end, make it into our top five but which is still important to us is the right to privacy and confidentiality.

Libraries are exceptionally good at (Q5):

1. *Service: helping people find what they want*
 2. *Providing access: to information, cultural heritage and collections*
 3. *Developing collections*
 4. *Providing a safe space for research and intellectual enquiry*
 5. *Social responsibility: serving the public good*
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Comments:

The first two responses below were almost universally agreed – we think that libraries are good at service - at helping people find what they want, whether that is particular information or more generally bringing them into contact with their cultural heritage. We also think that libraries are good at providing access to accurate information. This is a model of librarianship still based on the traditional idea that someone comes into our building or contacts us with a question or need and we meet that need. As our responses to later questions show, we see that there is a challenge here in that we need also to connect with the people who never come through our doors, search our resources or otherwise come into contact with us.

After that our group had diverse opinions about what libraries are good at, perhaps reflecting the different kinds of libraries in which we operate. We highlight here ‘developing collections’, something we do as a profession that perhaps needs more publicity – the work not just of providing one particular book or journal article or piece of information but of building a body of knowledge or of objects that gains value from its being gathered together.

Libraries should do more of (Q6):

1. *Reach out to help people experience and understand our collections and cultural heritage: lifelong learning, education, events*
 2. *Fighting for Information literacy and against illiteracy*
 3. *Engage with the digital world*
 4. *Work together and exchange knowledge*
 5. *Community ownership – make our communities feel that they belong in libraries and have a right to use our resources and collections*
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Comments:

The top priority for us reflects our work with rare materials and special collections: in contrast to the traditional service/access model that we said in Q6 our profession does well, what we want to do more of is active pushing ourselves and our collections out to engage with people, whether that means engaging with new groups and audiences, or more and better explanation and interpretation of our collections and the cultural heritage they embody. Related to this is another kind of pro-active engagement and teaching – information literacy, giving people the skills they need to find good information and facts for themselves. People see a need for libraries to help our patrons know how to look for facts in a world where not only is it easy to find inaccurate information, but there are active campaigns of misinformation and resistance to the commitment to truth and intelligent enquiry.

We note that for some of us the fight is against inaccurate information but for others the fight is to give people the basic literacy that they need to access information in the first place.

The digital world is also important for us: people mentioned not just digitising our collections but the need for us to engage with the digital and the internet as the places where people look for information. This includes changing how we do resource discovery - make it simple and remove the barriers of having to go through dedicated portals; connect the information we separately have created together. There are also the issues involved in intellectual property and the different legislations under which we operate. This is backroom work that does not often involve frontline involvement with the public but it is crucial that it be done to enable us to reach out to the people who may never walk through our doors but who do use the internet every day.

Libraries should do less of (Q7):

1. *Less limiting access – through money (charges) or practices*
2. *Less retaining old practices and services unquestioningly*
3. *Less bureaucracy and internal administration*
4. *Fewer capital projects, more sustainable services*
5. *Focus less on constantly improving services to those who already get a lot from us and more on engaging with new audiences*

Comments:

This relates to the primary value being 'openness': if that is our goal, what should we change or stop doing that will help us focus on that? But there is also a question about sustainability – as people who deal with collections that in some cases have survived for centuries, we think about the long term. These questions also need to be addressed at every level from the strategic to the operational.

Some people said they had no answers to this question – is this a good thing or a bad thing? Others had clear ideas about what should stop – which can be summed up as: we should question ourselves about why we do what we do and be prepared to change rather than just add new things

- Review existing practices and services – why keep up an interlibrary loans procedure at a certain expense when we could digitise and share instead
- Check on internal administration and other bureaucracy – do we really need these meetings? Can we simplify that paperwork?
- Less isolation from society and new trends in information sharing

Our ideas about limits to access probably show our rare books and special collections background – thinking about the charges we impose and about a culture where, as one person said 'we hoard books like treasure'. But we think this should change!

Challenges and solutions

The main challenges to society (Q8):

1. *Information challenges: overload/insufficient access, information literacy skills needed; 'alternative facts'*
2. *Inequality – wealth, access to information*
3. *Sustainability – society, climate change*
4. *People – need for understanding, respecting, empathising with one another*
5. *Lack of education and illiteracy*

Comments:

The first challenges that came to our minds were all about information – people see the world as one where the commitment to accuracy and truth-seeking we said were at the heart of our professional values is challenged – by the sheer amount of information out there that needs to be sifted, by the lack of skills needed to sift it, by the people who are anti-intellectual enquiry and deliberately putting out false information and ‘fake news’.

The other cluster of challenges relate to people. Our world needs people who understand, respect, empathise with one another. One person mentioned ‘making all people engaged in society’ – these things are necessary to make that happen. Another mentioned the need for a space for constructive discussion of controversial issues. Libraries can help with these challenges not just through the provision of information but through helping people find imaginative works that help them understand themselves and one another, through connecting them with their cultural heritage and other cultures, and through acting as the embodiment of a society that preserves and respects different cultures and respects and provides equal access to everyone.

The main challenges to libraries (Q9):

1. *Funding*

2. *How to help society meet its challenges*

3. *The digital world – our relevance and access to new technology and software*

4. *Maintaining our own professional standards*

5. *Lack of interest in preserving cultural heritage*

Comments:

Far and away the most important challenge identified was funding. Without the economic basis, how can we achieve our goals – or even survive? Some people specified particular funding challenges: the funding for technology - for instance is it enough for us to have some kind of computer when we need the funding to access and develop smartphone apps? – the constant demand for us to add new things to what we do without any new resources (or being able to stop outmoded services). This relates to the digital world where we have to be now to meet the people who could get something from the library sector and instead pick up whatever they get from social media. One person identified the key challenge facing both society and our sector as ‘conservatism’ with a small c – how do we as a profession change? How do we get people to change even such recent habits as not checking the fake news they see on their phones? How do we challenge the idea that libraries are first and foremost about physical buildings where certain activities take place – both within our profession and with people who think that means we are irrelevant to them?

The main professional challenges (Q10):

1. *Keeping up with new developments in technology*
2. *Getting people to engage with our collections and cultural heritage*
3. *Our own contradictory messages about access, reproduction rights etc*
4. *Serving different user groups well*
5. *Obtaining funding and resources for collection-facing work (preservation, description, digitisation, resource discovery)*

Comments:

Our group identifies three main areas of professional challenge – challenges in carrying out our work, challenges in delivering our mission and challenges we face ourselves in our profession. Our group identifies the professional challenges as an important area where professional workers need advice, support and advocacy. An organisation like IFLA must represent diverse perspectives here – different countries with different intellectual property and copyright laws; different levels from new professionals who want to develop their careers to those who have to manage staffing budgets with care. There were many different responses to this question but they fall into these three areas – a summary:

Challenges in carrying out our work:

- Obtaining funding and resources to carry out the crucial collections-facing work that preserves our collections and helps people find and access them – we mention especially cataloguing here as an essential task that does not attract external resources – people assume ‘everything is online’ now.
- The digital world: not just digitisation as an activity but how we deal with born-digital works

Challenges in delivering our mission:

- Serving different user groups well – as we said in Q7, we serve some user groups very well but how to serve all kinds of users equally? (for us this could be that we serve experienced academics very well but not so much someone outside the academy with a research project)
- Getting people to engage with our collections and cultural heritage – showing the relevance of special collections to individuals and to society as a whole
- Demonstrating the value of what we do and our collections to particular groups – building relationships with new communities, advocacy to funders or management
- The mixed messages ‘libraries’ as a whole give
 - Access rights – anyone versus restricted access
 - Reprographics and re-use – different policies on charges and rights

Challenges we face as professionals:

- Professional development: keeping up to date with new developments in technology and the digital sphere
 - Pay issues - pay gaps by gender or other factors; short-term contracts and project posts versus permanent jobs
 - Our role in relation to other professionals such as our relationship to academics – equals or support staff?
 - Finding adequate and affordable training
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How a united library field can make a difference

How should a united library field help meet the challenges identified (Q11)?

1. *Share best practices and work together at every level so that we become more effective*
2. *Advocate for libraries – what our value to society is and for our professional standards*
3. *By working together, better help and support minorities*
4. *Support one another with technology/digital developments*
5. *Use the power of a unified profession to lobby for our core values*

Comments:

Again the diverse answers show that people are as much concerned about what we do professionally and in our daily working lives as we are about the role that the representatives of a united library field can play addressing social issues. For us the value of being united is, as one person said, that ‘some sharing of approaches, policies or best practices would help so that one does not have to start from scratch’, whether that is at the level of how best to catalogue a book or at the level of recording and publicising the results of research and metrics that document the outcomes of library work and their benefits to society so that they can be used by anyone to demonstrate the value of libraries.

A united library field can also achieve efficiencies and improvements – so that we can save time and resources where possible and use that to concentrate on the hard stuff, whether that is new tech/digital developments or providing better services to hard-to-reach potential audiences and users. Having worked together on how best we could play a greater role in our respective societies we could start to act out the answers we have found.

People also clearly think the library field has a way to go be united but are enthusiastic about the potential for action and strength in lobbying that could be achieved: ‘Just by being “united” the library field could be an important pressure group for freedom globally’.

The characteristics of a united library field (Q12):

1. *United in our shared values*
2. *Open: opening up collections, sharing information and expressions of ideas*
3. *Respect for differences – a global perspective, aware of minority groups*
4. *Commitment to our professional standards*
5. *Able to respect and work with our professional differences and diverse backgrounds*

Comments:

The general consensus is that if we are united it should be around shared values – whatever our differences in how we put them into practice, which relates to the characteristics about respect for difference both in terms of being a global organisation and profession and a diverse profession in terms of the jobs people do, the expertise we have, and the fields in which we operate.

Again there is a sense of the great potential of being a united library field – ‘dedication to our core values’, ‘being a beacon of freedom of expression’, ‘the democratization of collections’ and ‘the open sharing of information and collections’; ‘respecting our diversity and using it to meet the challenges we face’.

The focus of a united library field (Q13):

1. *Providing free access to information for all*
 2. *Providing integrated access to information in a variety of formats and locations*
 3. *Educating in information literacy*
 4. *Cultural heritage: stewarding, developing and providing access to our collections*
 5. *Engaging with society pro-actively, particularly with new generations – meet the challenges of the digital world, reach out to those who don't use us, prove libraries' worth to society*
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Comments:

Our thoughts on what the focus could be fell into two categories – the focus for actions and what a united library field should be doing and the focus for goals and what a united library field should be aiming for. The top priority was the provision of free access to good quality information – in other words, our group thinks the focus of a united library field should be the actions which embody our values of openness and accessibility and a professional commitment to integrity, accuracy and factual information and intellectual freedom.

Focus on actions:

- Making sure that free access to good quality information and to cultural heritage is available to everyone, and also making sure that people know how to look for facts
- Reaching out to engage with people who don't come to us – especially to new generations
- Stewarding and developing our cultural heritage, especially in our long-term collection preservation
- Advocating for libraries' worth to society
- Working to meet the challenges of the digital age

Focus on goals:

- Access to information should be integrated and diverse (variety of formats and locations)
 - Our core values should be maintained – in our profession and in the world at large
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A global conversation

This report is created in an interactive process, and completed in Edinburgh on 10 July 2017. It is part of a global conversation initiated by IFLA on how a united library field can tackle the challenges of the future.

Over the course of two years (2017-2018), IFLA will involve as many librarians and others as possible in this global conversation. Participants are encouraged to continue the conversation in their own networks and organization and share the results with IFLA. At the end of 2017, the first results of all the workshops and online discussions will be turned into a *Global Vision Report*, which in turn will be adapted into concrete strategies, processes and work programmes in 2018.

To learn more about the global conversation, and download supporting materials to support your own activities, visit globalvision.ifla.org.

Stay tuned for news about the IFLA Global Vision discussion following [#iflaGlobalVision](https://twitter.com/iflaGlobalVision) and make sure to cast your vote in August when the online voting platform is available on <https://globalvision.ifla.org/>.