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THE INTERVIEW

The Interview: Louis Coiffait-Gunn

Abstract: The CEO of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), Louis Coiffait-Gunn, talks to LIM about his mission to lead CILIP and the profession it supports through the many changes it's now facing, why it shouldn't matter that he is not, and has never been, a librarian, and how he believes AI is likely to affect the library world.
Keywords: leadership; Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP); libraries; librarians; information professionals; knowledge managers; information managers



Louis Coiffait-Gunn has been CEO at CILIP since May 2024

The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) should speak for everyone in the entire library, knowledge and information sector, which means it has a very broad remit. There are members from academic libraries, public libraries, prison libraries, and let's not forget law libraries, to name just a few. Which is perhaps one of the reasons CILIP has chosen Louis Coiffait-Gunn as its CEO, because he has experience in a wide variety of fields, including government, think tanks, education, publishing and the press.

But there is one standout omission from Louis' CV, and that's libraries. Yet that is, in some ways, actually an advantage, for what he brings to the role is a fresh viewpoint, and also a much broader understanding of how to help shape policy, something that is vital in this ever-changing world.

"There is a golden thread in my career around improving policy with better evidence," says Louis, who took over from Nick Poole as CEO in May 2024. "That's the niche thing I'm interested in. I've mainly worked in adjacent sectors, so in government, in education, and in publishing.

"But I'm not a librarian, and I've never worked in the library sector before," Louis adds. "I did know my predecessor, in my last role with the Publishers Association I had met Nick a few times. But that was the first time I had heard of CILIP, which I thought was quite interesting, given that I had spent so much time in those adjacent sectors. Why hadn't I come across it before? Maybe that points to some of the opportunities, now that I'm CEO?"

But with no background in libraries or the wider information profession, just what was the attraction of the role at CILIP? "I think the thing that clicked for me is a slight change of language. I've always talked about evidence-informed policy, and CILIP would say things like 'trustworthy information'. But it's basically part of the same thing. It's how do you equip people, whether that's an individual citizen or a business or an entire government? How do you help them make better choices? A lot of my background has been around research evidence but, actually, there are lots of other types of information that can inform decision making, help people make better decisions, help them make better policy. And that connection really clicked for me, because it made me realise that I've been thinking about lots of these things using slightly different terminology for a really long time."

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Meanwhile, from CILIP's point of view, taking on someone with Louis' background was, perhaps, a recognition that it needed to be little more outward facing. "Part of the reason I was hired, I think, is my background in advocacy and in government, and this sense that the profession is slightly punching below its weight at the moment," Louis says. "I think I've been brought in to try and raise our profile. And I would like to think that I've taken us up a notch in terms of advocacy, so that's profile in the press, and public affairs work with the new government, for instance – I was only two weeks in post when the election was announced, so that really was very time consuming, and it was a big focus in my early months."

CILIP differs from most other professional organisations in that it has a Royal Charter, and this is always at the heart of the way it goes about its business. "We've had the Charter for 127 years," Louis says. "And what's in the Charter, the text, is basically our objectives as a charity. We're required to benefit the public, to benefit society. And some of the ways we do that is around things like education and information through the profession.

"As a charity, we have Trustees, we have a Chair, and then I'm on the exec team, and we have delegated authority from the Trustees," Louis adds. "We also have a Vice President for a year who then becomes the President for a year. They are spokespeople, so they don't set our strategy, they don't hold us to account. But it's a two-way street. Our current President, Sue Lacey Bryant, is travelling all over, giving presentations, as our Vice President, Carryl Allardice is starting to, too. And I'll sometimes work with them on presentations as they're broadcasting in some ways, but they're also out listening to members and other partners, and they're picking up information all the time that they will then feed back to me and colleagues."

BROAD CHURCH

Louis is a full-time paid employee of CILIP, one of about 50 in fact, which perhaps gives some idea of the size and the scope of the organisation. "It's bigger than most people realise and we do lots of different things," Louis says. "We're a very broad church as we serve the whole of the profession. Our members are typically individuals at any stage of their career, whatever sector they work in, but these days we also have organisational memberships, including about 160 Employee Partners. They are a really interesting development, because it means we don't just operate with the individual, we're also operating at that wider and more strategic level with a whole organisation in the sector, like a particular library service."

With thousands of members to represent, the role of CEO at CILIP clearly comes with a great deal of responsibility, but it is also very rewarding, says Louis, and he is enjoying the work immensely. "It's been a real privilege for me," he says. "There's a real breadth and variety, which is good, and that reflects itself in who I interact with; lots of different types of people. They tend to be very passionate, and they tend to be very expert, which is a fun combination. And I also like the fact that we are an explicitly ethical profession. We care about our values a lot, and CILIP has been very fundamental in that for 148 years [since 1877, when one of its two predecessor organisations was formed as the Library Association]."

FRESH APPROACH

Coming into the role as a non-librarian might be seen by some as a disadvantage, but Louis says it can be a positive. "I think one of the things I'm trying to bring is that slight outsider perspective in terms of I don't have all the history, I don't have all the detail; and most people outside the sector don't need that. It's important that it's there, but I think as a profession, we often dive into that a bit too quickly, perhaps. I think, trying to get us to step back and think about some very clear, simple, persuasive narratives that we can use on behalf of the whole information profession, that's one of the things I'm hoping to help with."

Indeed, he is now bringing that outside perspective to the many transformations that the profession faces at this time. "There's a lot of change. So I have to lead colleagues, volunteers, members and others through quite significant change, and to an extent, the wider sector, too. So yes, that's technology and funding, but there's lots of other stuff going on as well. There's something about professional identity, for instance, and I feel like I've walked into a profession which feels like it's slightly been backed into a corner. I think part of my job is to try and encourage people and support them and empower them to be confident and realise they have got something unique to offer society and their employers, which nobody else does. The tech industry is not going to be able to fix all the problems it's caused, they need us to help them, for example. So, it's about trying to make the case for that change, why it's necessary, avoiding and minimising risks, trying to be confident, ambitious and outward facing, seizing opportunities."

Some might say that librarians might not be best known for embracing change, however, or for putting themselves on the parapet to shout out about the profession, and Louis recognises that this can sometimes be the case. "I think, partly, my job and CILIP's job, and organisations like BIALL, is to do that on librarians' behalf. We're often a slightly hidden profession. We're a service profession. We're often buried within other organisations and supporting other professionals. So, we're not always that obvious. Or when people do think about us, they probably have a slightly narrow, probably quite outdated, view of the building full of books and the person at the front desk. But, actually, trying to get the message across about the range of

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CILIP has thousands of members working in a wide variety of information sectors – here some of them network at the organisation's annual conference

things that people in modern information services deliver these days, that's quite an exciting opportunity."

STRATEGIC THINKING

Louis has been CEO at CILIP for over a year now, which has meant he has had time to get used to the organisation, and the profession it represents, and he is ready to embark on the next phase for the organisation, which for the past five years (2021 to 2025) has adhered to the 'We are CILIP' strategy. Now a new strategy for the next five-year cycle (2026 to 2030) is being developed.

"'We are CILIP' was good, but it was quite internal facing. It was quite sector facing," Louis says. "The fact that it's called 'We are CILIP', when I saw that, I wondered why should anyone else care? I think, partly, that was because at the time there was a slight sense of fracturing, across the CILIP community, so I understand why 'We are CILIP' was necessary.

"But I think, given where we are now, we need that confident, outward-facing story. And the new strategy is very much about how CILIP will help the profession have a positive impact on society. That very simple story about how we exist to help the profession, the profession exists to help society, and just really focussing on that impact piece and not talking about why some people don't love us anymore and the negative things, such as why a library is closing."

How this will work on a practical level is largely by refocussing on the fundamentals of CILIP, that need to benefit people and society that's at the heart of its Royal Charter. "It's, what do you do for them today? What do you do for people now? How are you going to help them? And there's some really good stories and data there that can be drawn out. So that's the big idea with the new strategy. And with the public affairs aspect of that, it's basically systematically finding people in our community who we can empower to be those spokespeople. A good example of that is our Prison Libraries Group. We've had a lot of success with them, and it comes down to proactive members.

"With prison libraries, we wrote to the Justice Secretary. We then got a reply from the Prisons Minister, Lord Timpson, and then we followed up on that. The Justice Select Committee did an inquiry about reoffending. We put a submission into that. Again, working with our Prison Libraries Group members. Then we got called on to put an expert witness forward, and Victoria Barnett went in and gave a really great, understated, but very powerful, performance. So we should see prison libraries feature in the Committee's final report and the government's response."

Of course, CILIP does not operate in a vacuum in the information profession, and this also forms part of the new strategy. "There are two big parts in the new strategy, one is around that very simple narrative around impact on society. The other one is about working with partner organisations. I think there's a history of the sector sometimes being internal facing, debating and not agreeing on its external messages. It helps that I have no background here, so I don't have any history, I don't have any baggage. In all the sectors that CILIP works in, I'm really interested

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Louis wants CILIP to be more outward facing and the new strategy for the organisation reflects this

in partnering with other organisations to try and grow the cake together. I don't want to be in a zero-sum fight over ever-diminishing slices."

And this, of course, includes BIALL. "We really want to do more with BIALL," Louis says. "I think law libraries are a really interesting, innovative part of the sector. I know there's been various historic conversations about things we could do together between BIALL and CILIP, things like events, professional registration and advocacy. We're very open to working with partners. I think that the sector needs all of its different bodies to work together and speak with a very strong united voice externally."

VALUING VOLUNTEERS

For all of the above to work well, there needs to be people who will step up to the plate, which in organisations like CILIP, even with its permanent staff, means a reliance on attracting and retaining volunteers, something that is not always easy. "It is always slightly difficult for volunteers. Either they've got busy day jobs, or they've retired. So you have to start with where everyone is, and have really good systems and processes in place to support them. And think about why they're doing it, what's in it for them. Sometimes that's about giving back to the profession. Sometimes it's about their own career. Sometimes it's a mix of both or something else. I think we really rely on our volunteers from the Board down. There are hundreds of them across thousands of members.

"If we do what we plan to do, with the investment in improving the experience of being a volunteer and the experience of being a member, that will take away some of the friction that is there currently. So, for example, you used to have in-person periodic meetings for different groups. Then, off the back of the pandemic, everybody went online, and now we're in a hybrid mode. And I think that does create opportunities for people to be a bit more flexible about how they volunteer. We're doing an interesting pilot for our Public & Mobile Libraries Group at the moment, where rather than a formal committee and all the time required of committee members, we've got a slightly more informal, more online approach, which seems to be working quite nicely. We're going to probably roll this out to some other groups; giving people flexibility and options for how they engage is important."

REMAINING RELEVANT

Yet while getting people to volunteer is always a challenge, the profession faces far larger issues at this time, and one of these is remaining relevant in an ever-changing world. "Because we are perhaps that slightly less pushy profession, and partly because we care about things being right and truthful and care about the impact of things, I think we have slightly been edged out at different levels by the tech industry, which is newer and a bit brasher. The Zuckerberg quote is 'move fast and break things'. We're not a profession that likes to do either of those things. We like to move carefully and not break anything. And in some ways that makes our contribution even more important. Whether it's in a university or a law firm or a business, you don't only want a bunch of people who are moving fast and breaking things. Yes, you want some of them, but you also need people who care about metadata and equalities

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Louis believes that the profession does not need to fear AI, but CILIP members will need to be up for the challenge of experimenting with it

and what's the ethical impact of this new thing we're doing. These two groups together, it is quite a powerful combination.

"There are also definitely some challenges around public funding, generally, and then professional recognition for our profession," Louis adds. "Library services are often seen as a soft cut, within all kinds of contexts. So, a lot of the work that we want to do with the strategy around impact is about having that simple, compelling, persuasive story about what the sector does in lots of different contexts. And that should hopefully support members, employers and national bodies like us and our partners when it comes to advocating for the sector. But there are some definite challenges there."

Another challenge is an ageing workforce, and where the next generation of librarians and other information professionals will come from to replace those who are retiring. "CILIP has a particular duty there, around thinking about the whole sector talent pipeline. Historically, the route into the sector has been through 'library schools' (information and library higher education courses). CILIP accredits all 14 in the UK and some international ones, and typically you do a masters, which is quite a high bar of entry. CILIP has also been very proactive in the development of the apprenticeship route. Then the other more practice-based route is Professional Registration. So, becoming Chartered at the three different levels including in Knowledge Management. And you can do that through your practice at whatever career stage you're at. So, we're trying to make sure those three equal routes into the profession are all modern, engaging, functioning. We're helping attract people in, keeping them in, and helping them move around within the profession.

"We also periodically do a big workforce mapping exercise to understand the whole sector. We will do another one of these, probably next year. It's about trying to sort out the infrastructure, the sector's talent pipeline, and that flow of people into, through and out of it. That's something that CILIP cares a lot about, has done a lot of work on and needs to do a lot more, because it's a very competitive environment given all the other careers and sectors available."

ARTIFICIAL HORIZON

Of course, when it comes to the jobs in the sector in the future there's also AI to think about. "Everyone's worried about AI taking our jobs. I think that for this profession, if anything, it underlines the need to show AI's just a tool, and our members are going to be able to use that tool and make sure it achieves some of its promise. But anybody who just tries to replace our members with AI will encounter some major problems. But we need our members to be up for the challenge of experimenting with it, getting used to it, thinking critically about it. I think we're in a slightly vulnerable position at the moment, where we've got users and bosses who are perhaps naively more optimistic about AI than we are, whereas we see all the risks. We're often the people saying, 'no, but', and I think we need to get into a position where we are saying, 'yes, and you need to do this'."

More generally, as far as AI is concerned, Louis isn't quite convinced that it will completely live up to the huge expectations some have for it. "It is definitely a bubble and there's no way it can deliver the promised hype. I don't think it's going to pop the way the metaverse and crypto

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did, probably it's a bit more like the dotcom bubble, where it will change our lives, but not quite in the way or at the pace that's being shouted about at the moment."

There are also the questions around transparency and copyright to consider. "I've not met a member yet who doesn't want AI to be more transparent or who doesn't want AI to follow UK laws," Louis says. "I think it gets a bit more interesting when it comes to copyright, especially for some academic members, because I think there's a sense that, well, this is publicly funded research, we should just get it out there openly. We don't then need to pay again to access it.

"At the moment, some higher education librarians are basically in the same camp as some of the big tech companies, and that doesn't feel right to me. I don't think they do want the same thing. I think also it's about our ethics. It's called intellectual property for a reason. It is someone's property. If they've chosen to give their rights to a publisher or to someone else, then that's their choice, technically, so the idea that there can just be a free for all, especially for a large foreign commercial player, like a big tech company, that doesn't seem right. But I do get it. I think academic members, in particular, just feel like bigger commercial entities are taking advantage of them. It's not a particularly well-functioning market, and the prices go up while the budgets are coming down. I am quite keen to try and find some practical things that CILIP can do to help different types of members on some of those issues around rising costs. And AI is just an interesting new bit of that debate."

While no one can be entirely certain where AI will take us, Louis is sure about one thing, and that's that there will always be librarians. "We're definitely going to be here [in 10 years' time], probably still with the L word. I know some people have mixed feelings about the L word, but I think it's about that mixture. There's a core that is timeless and needs preserving, and that's around values and some of the basic nuts and bolts of the job that actually haven't changed. But then it's about that need to evolve and use the new tools, use the new language, and just be more confident about talking about the impact that we have. So, we'll definitely still be around. And I think, if anything, the societal need is growing. Whether it's tech and AI, or misinformation, or inequality, or the environment, or economic growth, you name it, this is where you need library and other information professionals to be at their best, because society needs us to help with some really tricky problems."

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