

Reflections on the ACURIL Conference 2024: Embracing Fresh New Ways to Improve Libraries

**By Ray Ganessingh
The Alma Jordan Library (UWI)**

Continuous and professional growth is an essential component for library professionals to stay relevant and effective as the landscapes of information and technology continue along their evolution. One opportunity for growth and learning is in attending conferences like The Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL) Conference, where information professionals gather to exchange ideas, share best practices, and explore emergent challenges to find solutions. This year's instalment of the conference, ACURIL 2024, was held under the theme "From Metadata to Big Data: Trends and Hidden Treasures in Libraries, Museums and Archives in the Caribbean" in Guyana, and was a dynamic gathering of information professionals, archivists, and exhibitors.

One of the prominent workshops held at the conference that was in line with the theme was "Your Added Value as an Information Professional in Times of Change" by Eric Kokke, Marketing Manager at GO Opleidingen, a school for continuous professional development in the field of information. Kokke underscored the necessity for information professionals to accept the restructuring of their roles into ones that provide library services and products that would have added value to their users. Moreover, library professionals would need to be equipped to analyse and extract insights from the vast volumes of information suffusing the library and research spaces. Physical libraries, therefore, would need to avail themselves of and prepare themselves for new technologies in the data space, including artificial intelligence (AI), and the evolution of digital information storage. Additionally, there would need to be a rebranding of the image of libraries to attract users and maintain users' perception of their value and usefulness in the ongoing information age.

With some of these new concerns come the question of data security in the age of AI. This concern was the topic explored in the presentation "Big Data Security and Privacy in Libraries: Protecting Against Cyber Attacks" by Ray Ganessingh from the Alma Jordan Library at The University of the West Indies, St Augustine; Dihanne Saul of the National Library of Guyana; and Delise Thomas of the National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS), Port-of-Spain. Attendees were able to participate in conversations on the developing topic, and share ideas to further develop the breadth and depth of the contemporary issue, such as the role AI can play in safeguarding library systems.

Discussion among professionals continues to be one of the considerable strengths of conferences like ACURIL's. While varied themes, issues and ideas were explored, there were several leading ones that emerged from the presentations, workshops and informal discussions:

1. Data presented visually is better understood by their audiences.
2. Big data is an important tool for gleaning essential information on how to improve library services.
3. AI will transform the information search experience.
4. Resource sharing in Caribbean libraries needs to become better established across all countries.
5. Libraries have to constantly evaluate and revise their strategies for continuing to provide excellent service and exceed user expectations with stretched budgets.
6. Information professionals are still the best sources of trustworthy and reliable information when compared to large language models like ChatGPT.

7. Sharing perspectives on collection development may provide much needed clarity on what criteria should be used to downsize print collections, and what policies should influence what formats are purchased for new acquisitions.
8. Food and drink restrictions may need to be reassessed to attract new users and retain existing ones.
9. Online Educational Resources are free and can benefit libraries with expanded access to learning in various disciplines.
10. Flexible working hours for library staff can boost productivity.

Overall, conferences are key to lifelong learning for information professionals as libraries continue to play a vital role in the success of their communities. The ACURIL Conference 2024 has provided a forum for fresh ideas on how to improve libraries by surpassing user expectations and exceeding institutional objectives, and in doing so, has contributed to ongoing efforts to keep libraries accessible to all.

The next ACURIL Conference will be held in June 2025 in Curaçao.