The Network Newsletter: tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries

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The Network's Website is at www.seapn.org.uk and includes information on courses, good practice, specific socially excluded groups, as well as the newsletter archive.

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Did you see …?

Information Professional

The Jan-Feb issue includes:

- Jo Cornish "Championing CILIP members at the highest levels of government across all four nations", which sets out how CILIP intends to promote the role of libraries and information, as well as emphasising relationship-building and their public affairs work [pp16-17]

- Matt Finch "Owning your own story" ("Insight" column), which looks at some of the dangers of having your 'story' available forever via social media; he emphasises the inequality that arises when people have specific reasons for "bracketing off their past" (eg queer youth leaving intolerant communities [pp18-19]

- "Getting back in the loop", in which Rob Mackinlay, together with Jon Davis, assess the Sanderson Review[1],[2] [pp20-22]

- Nick Poole "Libraries, critical thinking and the war on truth – what lies ahead in 2024", in which Nick – in a personal essay – looks at what's coming up, especially the impact of climate change, mis- and dis-information, and the urgent need to develop and hold on to professional values [pp28-30]

- Rob Green "Come rain or shine – a practical guide to planning for an unknown future" ("In depth" column), which introduces CILIP's new report[3] which was also assessed in the previous Newsletter[4]

- Rob Mackinlay interviews Isobel Hunter, "We are ready", which looks at some key issues facing public libraries and argues that, following the pandemic, libraries are now ready to cope with new challenges [pp36-38]

- Ash Green "Recommended reading for developing Library & Information LGBTQ+ services" (Insight" column) which suggests some key recently-published books … and also reminds us about the role of the CILIP LGBTQ+ Network [p42]

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[1] Elizabeth Sanderson. *An Independent Review of English public libraries*. DCMS, 2024, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a9211ced27ca000d27b22c/An_Independent_Review_of_English_Public_Libraries_-_formatted.pdf.

[2] This was assessed in the previous Newsletter: *The Network Newsletter*, 272, Oct 2023, pp2-7, https://seapn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Newsletter-NS-272.pdf.

[3] Shared Intelligence. *Come rain or shine: preparing public libraries for the future in an age of uncertainty*. CILIP, 2024, https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/resmgr/cilip/future_libraries/horizon_scanning_report_-_co.pdf.

[4] *The Network Newsletter,* 272, Oct 2023, pp8-9, https://seapn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Newsletter-NS-272.pdf.

Museums Journal

The March/April issue includes:

- Simon Stephens "Tough times for civic museums" (Editorial), which outlines some of the pressure that local authority museums are facing [p3]

- Geraldine Kendall Adams "Battle over free speech", which looks at how far "open debate is curbed in museums", including issues around Israel/Palestine, 'woke' and 'anti-woke' positions, gender-critical positions, and the presentation of LGBTQ+ work and history [pp4-5]

- Simon Stephens "Better safe than sorry", which raises key issues about data security after the cyber-attack on the British Library [pp8-9]

- Karl Mercer "Contemporary collection practices need to reflect the lives of neurodiverse people"[5] ("Comment" column) [p12], which argues that:

    "My experience, and that of many of my colleagues, is that our collections do not reflect lived experiences equally. The lives and stories of disabled people seem particularly under-represented – in some cases, perhaps hidden through unconscious bias or deliberate stigma."

The article then goes on to make some very important points:

    "Colleagues at other museums have told me their collections are just as lacking in representation of neurodiversity and autism. But surely it is there and we can just go looking for it? Yes and no. The first person recognised as having an autistic spectrum condition was US banker Donald Triplett in 1943. With this date in mind, it would be wrong to scour past records, find people with lives, tales and idiosyncrasies that look 'a bit like autism' and retrospectively diagnose them. We can recognise relatable aspects, but we cannot call it autism.

    The collections, then, are reliant on objects and stories collected since 1943 – and it will surprise only the most naive of people to find that almost no one collected objects relating to the lives of disabled people, unless a local 'person of note' is seen to be being charitable. The entire social evolution of my neurotype, a thing as inalienable from me as my eye colour, is not there. Our past, therefore, is invisible. We are erased.

    It is a can that has been kicked down the road for too long. Contemporary collection practices must be more proactive to prevent this problem for future generations of curators. It shouldn't just look at big events but should make collections more rounded

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[5] See: https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2024/03/collections-need-to-reflect-lives-of-neurodiverse-people/.

and boost representation. We need to ensure that collections truly reflect society."

- Sara Wajid "There is a lot to learn from BMT's approach to workforce diversity", which looks at how Birmingham Museums Trust is empowering its workforce to embody diversity:

    "There are eight people in the senior leadership team at Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT). We range in age from 30 to 50; five identify as people from global majority backgrounds; four are women; four work part-time as job-shares; about half identify as being from working-class backgrounds; half are parents; and some, including me, identify as LGBTQ+."

- Victoria Pomeroy "The Box's John Akomfrah commission is informing its work on decolonisation"[6] ("Comment" column) [p15]:

    "Artist John Akomfrah was commissioned in 2019 to create a new installation as part of Plymouth's Mayflower 400 commemorations and the opening of The Box. But the global pandemic made filming impossible and it was agreed that the commission should be delayed.

    The Box opened in 2020 and finally, this autumn, we were able to launch Akomfrah's Arcadia [7], three years later than anticipated. The theme of the work has been reconsidered in light of the impact of the pandemic […]

    Plymouth is central to any discussion regarding British colonialism. The city's journey to understand more about its past, however, may have lagged slightly behind that of other cities in the UK.

    The Box is committed to taking a leading role in this work. Three years on from our opening, much has already happened but there is still a great deal more to do. Our current focus involves a rehang

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[6] Published online as: "Plymouth is central to the story of British colonialism", MA, 12 Dec 2023, https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2023/12/plymouth-is-central-to-the-story-of-british-colonialism/.

[7] "With beautiful visuals of landscapes from across the globe, stunning underwater footage and a haunting soundtrack, Arcadia reflects on 'The Columbian Exchange' – the widespread transfer of plants, animals, precious metals, commodities, populations, technology, diseases and ideas between the Americas, Afro-Eurasia and Europe – the 'New World' and the 'Old World' – from the 1400s onwards.

The film is presented across five screens in the shape of a cross with a multi-layered narrative featuring storms, restless seas, vast skies, beaches, ice fields, mountains, rivers and forests.

We see how miraculous our planet is, but the epic scenery and landscapes are 'interrupted' by images of cargo, symbols of trade, ageing boat hulks, microbes, cells and people suffering from smallpox. They combine to evoke ideas of migration, journeys, colonial encounters, how things travel and spread, growth and decay." [Taken from: https://www.theboxplymouth.com/events/exhibitions/john-akomfrah-arcadia]

of one of our permanent galleries and the recruitment of a global histories producer [...]

The project has also enabled the team at The Box to consider how our wider work around decolonisation is informed by conversations with artists. As we grow our engagement with artists and audiences, we continue to feed new ideas into our role as a leading cultural organisation of the 21st century."

- Caroline Parry "In the hot seat", which looks at how to deal with "the wrong sort of media attention" via a crisis management plan [pp24-27]

- Geraldine Kendall Adams "A new era" [pp32-33], which looks at how the Toronto Holocaust Museum is looking at new approaches "[…] to ensure the stories of those who lived through the Holocaust are never forgotten." [p32]

- Syma Ahmed and Tabassum Niamat "A lasting legacy", which outlines how Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum worked with people of colour to co-create the exhibition, "Glasgow – City of Empire"[8] [pp42-43, 45]

Black Lives Matter/Anti-racism

Anti-racist systems leadership to address systemic racism

This is important new guidance[9]:

"This briefing offers an overview of anti-racist systems leadership. It does not shy away from the complexities and challenges of tackling the roots of racism. Enduring disparities and inequitable outcomes persist, systems leadership working together could and should eradicate these inequalities.

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[8] "Glasgow – City of Empire explores how the city's past and present have been heavily shaped by histories of slavery and Empire, and their legacies.

Glasgow Life, the charity that delivers culture and sport in the city, has confirmed the exhibition is free to visit and will open to the public from Friday 3 November.

The exhibition, which is in the South Balcony, has been co-curated with the Our Shared Cultural Heritage (OSCH) Changemakers.

The Changemakers are a group of young people who explore the shared cultures and histories of the UK and South Asia." [Taken from: https://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/news/new-exhibition-at-kelvingrove-art-gallery-and-museum-explores-glasgow-s-links-to-slavery-and-empire]

[9] Meera Spillett. *Anti-racist systems leadership to address systemic racism*. Research in Practice ("Strategic Briefing"), 2024, https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/media/sooflams/anti-racist-practice-strategic-briefing-joint_web.pdf.

The briefing aims to:

- Support leaders in developing critical thinking to understand how systemic racism is constructed and perpetuated in policies, tools and practice within individual organisations and partnerships.
- Provide important concepts and signpost to research and resources that illustrate the multi-layered impact of racism within communities, workforces and across local public service systems.
- Offer tools to enable partners to establish themselves with anti-racist systems leaders and case study examples of local system's development." [p2]

The first chapter, "Disproportionality and inequity in the public sector", highlights key issues:

"Without understanding how our systems have been built, we cannot fully comprehend how systems leaders must tackle racism, oppression, and discrimination. The reality today is that structural, systemic racism continues to significantly impact human lives. Multiple sources of evidence of outcomes show disproportionality and differential treatment of Global Majority children and adults by the systems which should support them." [p6]

and then looks at racial inequity in the public sector (especially the NHS; police, fire and rescue services; the judiciary; and education):

"Senior leadership teams across the public sector continue to be mainly occupied by people who do not reflect the demographics of communities they serve." [p6]

It uses the concept of multi-dimensional racism as the method for analysing this further via the five "domains" of economy; education; policing and criminal justice; housing; and health (including social care).

This is followed by a set of questions "[…] to reflect on within leadership teams and partnership networks […]" [p9]

The next chapter looks at "Systems leadership, individual and partners' ownership"; this is followed by a chapter on "Values, Motivation and Action: ME: WE: US" – ie:

"The ME: WE: US framework is designed to enable leaders to reflect on their own values, their congruence with their organisational values, and how partnerships can build a framework of shared values to underpin their strategic system values. This can provide a powerful impetus for building a framework of shared values to underpin an anti-racist coalition across systems." [p11]

This is followed by a chapter on "Contemporary discussions on race" – a really clear outline of how the concept of 'race' has been constructed over time and is perpetuated now – and then has an important chapter on "Responding to racial trauma", looking at, for example, the need to enhance safe spaces; and then

three steps which could "[…] support both Global Majority individuals and white colleagues seeking to tackle racism." [p15]:

1. Recognising or 'consciously witnessing racism'.
2. Working through and processing events (psychologically and socially)
3. Taking critical action.

The next chapter looks at "Advancing Anti-Racist Systems Leadership". This is broken down into:

- Getting started
- Maintaining momentum (including looking at structures and cultures)
- What the guidance calls "Paradoxes", ie issues around Power, Conflict, Uncertainty
- Indicators of success.

The next chapter is "Examples of developing anti-racist local systems", a series of brief case studies.

This is followed by "Supporting critical conversations: Platitudes, Proximity and Progress":

"What is impeding efforts to tackle racism as individuals, collectives and coalitions? The 'Three Ps' offers a way to reflect as organisations and systems leaders on tackling racism, getting closer to areas of systemic racism, encouraging critical conversations to grasp the 'reality of disparity' in the outcomes for Global Majority people." [p26]

Proximity is defined as:

"Proximity is relational and intentional and builds relationships that are based on values (see ME: WE: US). Systems leaders, particularly white leaders and colleagues, need to situate themselves in a way that enables them to recognise systemic racism and be accountable for action. The lens of critical consciousness needs to be used to maintain proximity and accountability for challenging covert and overt racism." [p26]

Finally, the Conclusion includes:

"We have an inordinate amount of data which evidences the continuing, persistent and enduring racism across the public sector that affects individuals before the cradle and into the grave, blighting every aspect of life. Wilful denial of racism remains and achieving change in the face of this, is complex, challenging and relentless (and yet essential).

It is vital for systems leaders to also pay attention to the stress and trauma facing their Global Majority workforce and communities. Many experience everyday racism, both overt and covert, and their outcomes show enduring complexities and disparities.

Systemic racism replicates itself and will do so until systems leaders recognise and actively seek to uncover its flawed foundations and

reconstruct them. Developing meaningful workforce strategies must take account of the racism inherently built into systems, organisations and processes. Recognising power differentials is crucial to building, admitting and empowering Global Majority staff and leaders. There are tools in this briefing and resources to support anti-racist systems leaders, starting with our own values, learning about our blind spots and intentionally acting to eradicate racial equity." [p29]

Lastly, there is a list of further resources.

This is a readable, practical guide which would be of real value in developing anti-racist principles and practice.

Recommended.[10]

Broader issues – Other Agencies

"Contested heritage" and "Culture wars"

A recent article[11] in *Left Foot Forward* noted some major concerns in the US about what they called "[…] a dirty war on history and education […]".

> "[…] Arizona is advocating for a curriculum that caters for the far-right. Earlier this year, the state's education chief and an unaccredited, conservative media and education company known as PragerU[12,13], announced that Arizona would allow the use of the organisation's ideological content as part of approved classroom curriculum. The non-profit has become a fundraising goliath, attracting big conservative donors. Promoting climate-crisis denialism and other 'anti-woke' staples, PragerU says it creates content that 'advances Judeo-Christian values' and portrays a view of American science and history that is based more on ideological views than evidence. It has vowed to disrupt classrooms in Arizona with a propaganda-like curriculum and establish similar partnerships in every state."

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[10] Source: email from Research in Practice, 28 Mar 2024.

[11] Gabrielle Pickard-Whitehead "Right Wing Watch", *Left Foot Forward*, 9 Mar 2024, https://leftfootforward.org/2024/03/the-rights-ideological-war-on-education/.

[12] According to its own website: "We promote American values through the creative use of educational videos that reach millions of people online. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Prager University Foundation ("PragerU") offers a free alternative to the dominant left-wing ideology in culture, media, and education." https://www.prageru.com/about.
A 501(c)(3) nonprofit: "A 501(c)(3) organization is a United States corporation, trust, unincorporated association or other type of organization exempt from federal income tax under section 501(c)(3) of Title 26 of the United States Code. It is one of the 29 types of 501(c) nonprofit organizations […] in the US." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/501(c)(3)_organization.

[13] According to Wikipedia: "The Prager University Foundation, known as PragerU, is an American […] nonprofit advocacy group and media organization that creates content promoting conservative viewpoints on various political, economic, and sociological topics." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PragerU.

The article continues:

> "The approval of far-right material for classrooms, alongside the banning of books and material that mention gay people, racism or sexuality, has drawn a backlash from Democrats and educators. Warnings have been made that allowing such inaccurate representations of history into the classroom does pupils a disservice and will put them at an academic disadvantage later in life."

There is also note of what would appear to be a real return to Victorian values:

> "Meanwhile, in Florida, schools are facing pressure about 'nudity.' A picture book that showed an illustration of a goblin's bare bottom was removed from shelves. School officials even coloured in a pair of pants on the goblin to save students from such debauchery."

It helpfully adds:

> "Much of the right-wing puritan drive in education in the US comes from a group known as Moms for Liberty. The co-founders of what has been described as an 'extremist' group are linked to anti-LGBTQ politicians, public figures and media outlets."

The next paragraph then highlights the particular significance for us:

> "While not (yet) on the same scale, there are signs that the US's ideological war on education is being imported to the UK.
>
> Like Conservatives in America, the argument that the 'crisis' in schools is about 'woke' teachers propagandising critical race theory and giving pupils pronouns is gaining impetus in Britain.
>
> Tory MP Miriam Cates has demanded a full ban on trans student's gender identity being recognised in schools […]
>
> Meanwhile, a high school in Derbyshire was forced to cancel a Pride event following the moral outrage the LBTGQ+ event attracted among some parents, and was stirred up by the right-wing press."

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"A dying baby, a Trump tweet: Inside network setting global right-wing agenda"

OpenDemocracy has published an interesting – if grim – investigation[14] into the role that the organisation, Agenda Europe, played in the Charlie Gard[15] case and, later, that of Alfie Evans[16]:

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[14] Sian Norris "A dying baby, a Trump tweet: Inside network setting global right-wing agenda", *OpenDemocracy*, 25 Mar 2024, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/inside-the-network-setting-global-right-wing-agenda/.
[15] See, for example: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Gard_case.
[16] See, for example: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfie_Evans_case.

> "[…] Agenda Europe, a network of more than 400 ultra-conservatives, who had spent the previous four years working together to oppose abortion, equal marriage, divorce and contraception, and had links to the Kremlin, Donald Trump and far-right MPs across Europe."

The article is based on a series of leaked emails:

> "They reveal for the first time how US, Russian and European anti-abortion, anti-LGBTQ+ activists and politicians were in constant contact, offering support on local and national campaigns. The group's actions include campaigning on referendums that successfully prevented equal marriage rights, challenging calls to end gender-based violence, and influencing the rise of anti-abortion, anti-LGBTQ+ feelings and policy-making in multiple European countries.
>
> As the following shows, these emails illustrate the emergence of a coherent and organised counter-narrative to the liberal world-view that was, until recently, generally espoused by an increasing number of democracies around the world. Agenda Europe, and its successor, Vision Network, served as a gathering place where conservative thought in its many disparate strands came together into a coherent worldview."

Abbreviations and acronyms

CILIP = Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals

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