Erzsébet Dani
University of Debrecen; Katona József County Library, Hungary
E-mails: dani.erzsebet@arts.unideb.hu; bujdosone.dani.erzsebet@kjmk.hu
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8771-8335

Knowledge, Community, Sustainability: Professional Horizons for the Future of Libraries at the 57th Hungarian Librarians' Itinerary Convention

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Erzsébet Dani is an associate university professor at the University of Debrecen, Hungary, who teaches several courses in Library and Information Science, Culture and Literature. She graduated from Eszterházy Károly College, at Eötvös Lóránd University, and was awarded her PhD degree in Eötvös Loránd University Doctoral Program for Literature and Cultural Studies (2008). She got her habilitation degree (sociology, 2016) at the University of Debrecen. She is the Head of the Department of Library and Information Science and the Director of the Bács-Kiskun County Library. Her general research interests are reading research/digital reading narratives, dissemination of scientific results, cultural identity and institutional history in the Carpathian Basin. She has two scientific monographs and several published studies.

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to provide a professional analysis of the 57th Itinerary Conference of the Hungarian Librarians' Association, held in Kecskemét (Katona József County Library), within the framework of the interrelationships between knowledge, community and sustainability. The study is based on a thematic analysis of the conference's plenary, section and workshop programs, as well as an interpretive synthesis of the international literature on the social role of libraries. The results show that digital transformation, artificial intelligence, research data management and metadata standards bring about not only technological changes but also organisational and competency-related changes. At the same time, the

role of libraries in community building, preserving cultural identity and supporting social participation is gaining prominence. The environmental, economic, social and organisational dimensions of sustainability emerge as mutually reinforcing factors. The study concludes that the library of the future will function as an adaptive social knowledge infrastructure that integrates the preservation of cultural memory, access to reliable information, competency development, community participation and sustainable development.

The Itinerary Convention as a Space for Professional Knowledge and a Forum for Collective Reflection

For more than half a century, the Hungarian Librarians' Association's (HLA – in Hungarian MKE)[1] traveling convention has been one of the most significant professional forums in Hungarian librarianship. The first meeting was held on 27–28 June 1969, in Tata; and the conference series that has developed since then – with the exception of the forced interruption in 2020 – has consistently provided a space for discussing current issues in the library profession, sharing institutional experiences and strengthening ties within the professional community.

The term "itinerary convention" does not merely refer to the event's geographical location, which changes from year to year. Its deeper professional significance lies in the decentralised flow of knowledge, the convergence of local and national professional experiences and the transfer of library innovation between institutions. From this perspective, the "Traveling Conference" can be understood as one of the most important informal knowledge-sharing mechanisms within the Hungarian library system. The combination of plenary presentations, section meetings, workshops, institutional visits and personal encounters creates a multilevel professional learning environment in which, alongside explicit knowledge-acquisition processes, the transfer of practical experience and organisational culture are also decisive.

This approach is consistent with Lankes's (2011) concept of "new librarianship." According to Lankes, the paradigm of new librarianship shifts the focus from a document-centered approach to knowledge and learning processes. Accordingly, the primary mission of librarians is not merely to convey and exchange information, but to actively contribute to communities' knowledge-creation processes, which ultimately serve social development. According to this view, the librarian is not simply an information intermediary but a professional who supports the creation of knowledge, acting as a facilitator of dialogues, relationships and community learning processes. From this perspective, the traveling convention itself serves as the professional community's knowledge-generating infrastructure: a space where institutional practices can be compared, problems can be interpreted collectively and innovations can be shared.

Kecskemét hosted the 57th traveling itinerary convention for the third time. Approximately 750 library professionals from Hungary and the Carpathian Basin

[1] In Hungarian: Magyar Könyvtárosok Egyesülete (MKE).

attended the convention at this time. The choice of venue is symbolic in itself: for a few days, a city became the center of Hungarian librarianship – a city that, owing to its historical traditions, cultural institutions, economic dynamism and innovative potential, is particularly well suited to providing a framework for professional discourse on the future of libraries.

The Relationship Between the MKE (HLA) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)

The relationship between the MKE and IFLA dates back to 1938, meaning that the Association has been a member of the largest international organisation of library and information institutions for nearly nine decades. Sharon Memis, IFLA's Secretary General, specifically highlighted this in her plenary lecture at the MKE's 90th anniversary conference in 2025, which served as important recognition of the MKE's international integration.

Professor Ágnes Barátné Hajdu was pivotal in significantly strengthening the international recognition of Hungarian librarianship. She served as Vice President (2007–2015) and then President (2015–2023) of the MKE. She held numerous leadership positions within IFLA: she was a member of the Classification and Indexing Section and later of the Standing Committee of the Knowledge Management Section, serving as both secretary and chair of the latter. She participated in the work of the international working group "Building Strong Library and Information Science Education" (BSLISE), and in 2015 she was elected as the first Hungarian to serve on the IFLA Governing Board, where she served for two terms (2015–2019). She later served as a member of the IFLA Europe Regional Division Committee and is currently a member of the board of directors of Stichting IFLA Global Libraries. For many years, Ágnes was a regular presenter at IFLA World Congresses and numerous other international professional events.

Currently, Judit Gerencsér represents the library community internationally within IFLA. From 2019 to 2023, she served as an elected member of the Standing Committee of the IFLA Law Libraries Section, and in 2025, she was elected to the IFLA Europe Regional Division. She currently serves as Information Coordinator for the body, a role in which she coordinates professional communication and the flow of information within the European region, strengthens cooperation among member organizations and increases the international visibility of European library initiatives.

This is also directly reflected in the operations of the MKE. Their goal is to bring IFLA's strategic directions and international trends to the Hungarian library community, while also sharing Hungarian best practices, innovations and professional achievements in international forums. For this reason, the MKE is now not merely a follower but increasingly a shaper of international professional dialogue.

Kecskemét As a Cultural and Innovative Environment

Kecskemét is the seat of Bács-Kiskun County and one of the country's major regional centers. Its geographical location has shaped its development for centuries: within the network of settlements between the Danube and Tisza rivers, it has served as a commercial, economic and cultural hub, a city with a population of approximately 110,000, uniquely blending historical heritage, artistic tradition, education, cultural institutions and contemporary economic modernisation into its identity.

The city's cultural character has been shaped by defining bodies of work and traditions, such as the dramatic legacy of József Katona and the spirit of Zoltán Kodály's music pedagogy. Linked to this are folk art, the visual arts, animation culture, theater life and the city's architectural heritage. At the same time, Kecskemét has undergone a profound industrial and technological transformation in the 21st century. The launch of the local Mercedes-Benz manufacturing facility in 2012 and the development of the associated supplier network have made the city one of the key centers of industrial modernisation in Hungary.

This duality – tradition and innovation, cultural heritage and technological modernization – is particularly relevant to contemporary librarianship. Libraries, in fact, face a similar structural challenge: they must preserve their functions as cultural, archival and memory institutions while simultaneously becoming active participants in digital transformation, skills development and social innovation.

From this perspective, Kecskemét can be viewed as more than a representative conference venue. The city itself exemplifies the social and cultural transition that is shaping libraries today: the preservation of historical identity and technological renewal are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing processes.

The Katona József Library: From a Collection-Based Institution to a Complex Social Knowledge Infrastructure

The history of the conference host, the Katona József Library, dates back more than a century. Its predecessor, the Kecskemét City Library, was founded in 1897; the institution was granted county library status in 1952, and in 1955 it was renamed after József Katona, a native of the city. The current library building opened in 1996; it extends into three floors overing approximately 6,000 square meters, providing space for collection, information, community, educational and cultural functions.

However, the significance of this institution, which houses approximately half a million documents, cannot be described solely in terms of collection or circulation statistics. In line with the evolving social role of contemporary public libraries, the Katona József Library has also developed into a multifunctional knowledge and community institution where, alongside traditional document services, there is a strong emphasis on digital literacy development, the promotion of information literacy, the promotion of reading, community-building, lifelong learning and the dissemination of innovative technologies.

This understanding of the public library's role is closely linked to the international reinterpretation of such an institution. According to the IFLA–UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (2022), a public library is a fundamental institution of the knowledge society that contributes to the development of communities by ensuring access to universal knowledge and information, supporting lifelong learning, facilitating participation in cultural life, strengthening informed democratic decision-making and fostering social inclusion, thereby contributing to the development of communities (IFLA & UNESCO, 2022). The document maintains that the democratic significance of public libraries stems from the fact that they provide access to knowledge and cultural participation for everyone, while supporting independent thinking and active citizenship.

Klinenberg's concept of social infrastructure (2018) offers a further fruitful framework for interpreting the social role of the library. Social infrastructure is a collection of physical spaces and institutions that shape the possibilities for social connections, encounters and community participation. From this perspective, the library is not merely a service-providing institution but an open community space that can reduce social isolation, strengthen local ties and contribute to social resilience.

These features are particularly important for understanding the operations of the Katona József Library and its role as host of the traveling itinerary convention. The conference was not simply "hosted" by Kecskemét: local institutional practices, the city's cultural infrastructure and the national professional discourse emerged as a mutually reinforcing system.

"The Future of Libraries: Knowledge, Community, Sustainability" An Integrative Professional Paradigm

The central theme of the 57th traveling conference – "The Future of Libraries: Knowledge, Community, Sustainability" – brought together three concepts that represent the fundamental transformative processes of contemporary librarianship. One of the program's most significant professional strengths was precisely that it framed these concepts not as separate problem areas but as interrelated dimensions.

"Knowledge" refers to a reinterpretation of libraries' traditional role as information intermediaries. In the digital environment, the sheer volume of information does not in itself constitute knowledge. Alongside the democratization of access, assessing the credibility of sources, the opacity of the algorithmic information environment, disinformation and the epistemological uncertainty of content generated by generative artificial intelligence are becoming increasingly serious problems.

The concept of "community" is based on the recognition that the social value of the library cannot be measured solely in terms of individual information use. The library builds local networks, supports social participation, conveys cultural identity and provides a public space where different social groups can come together.

"Sustainability," meanwhile, encompasses environmental, social, economic and institutional sustainability. IFLA's professional activities related to sustainable development consistently emphasise that libraries can contribute to achieving the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda through access to reliable information, education, digital inclusion, community participation and the preservation of cultural heritage (IFLA, 2023).

The convention-program structure highlighted the interplay among these three dimensions.

From Digital Transformation to Strategic Institutional Role

The theme of the presidential session, **"The Library as a Strategic Institution for Digital Transition and Sustainable Development"** essentially defined the interpretive framework for the entire conference. The issue posed in this title stemmed from the premise that digitization is not merely technological modernisation but a structural process that transforms the entire operation of libraries.

The digital transformation of libraries can be understood on at least four levels. First, it affects collections: digitisation, digital preservation and the delivery of electronic content require new infrastructure. Second, it transforms workflows and integrated library systems. Third, it alters user behaviour, as information retrieval increasingly takes place in a platform-based and algorithmically mediated environment. Fourth, it redefines the librarian's competency profile.

The presentations in the **"New Technologies – Innovations" section** illustrated this complex transformation through specific professional challenges. Modern digitisation technologies, the national library's educational activities, the digital transformation of legal data, the ALMA library service platform, the transition to new software in university libraries and the question of the relationship between artificial intelligence and reliability may seem like disparate topics at first glance. In reality, they represent different levels of the same structural transformation.

Digitisation is transforming the representation of documents; library platforms are reorganising institutional workflows; artificial intelligence is altering the conditions under which information is created and evaluated; and the software migration brings to the surface the problem of organizational adaptation. The common thread among these topics is that technological innovation only becomes library innovation when it is accompanied by a rethinking of workflows, competencies and service models.

Of particular significance is the professional issue that positions librarians as guardians of trust in the age of AI. The rise of generative artificial intelligence is fundamentally transforming the information environment. UNESCO's approach to media and information literacy warns that generative AI places issues such as our relationship with information, human autonomy, decision-making and credibility in a new context (UNESCO, 2024).

In this environment, librarians' traditional competencies in source evaluation, organisation and contextualisation do not lose their significance but rather become

even more valuable. At the same time, they must be supplemented with new skills – algorithmic literacy, AI literacy, data interpretation, prompt engineering and the ability to critically evaluate automated systems. The library's future role as a source of authority, therefore, is not simply to "preserve reliable information," but to support the critical interpretation of the information environment.

The **"Digital Future" section** explored a deeper layer of digital library transformation. Research data management, the ALMA platform's research support applications, the relationship between artificial intelligence and identity research, digital preservation, the practical application of RDA and the complete representation of documents collectively indicate that the future of libraries is increasingly taking shape in the world of data, metadata and interoperable knowledge structures.

Research data management is a particularly important area. As a result of the rise of open science, libraries are becoming involved at more and more stages of the research lifecycle: in the development of data management plans, repository services, metadata creation, increasing the visibility of research results and supporting long-term access. Cox and Pinfield (2014) pointed out a decade ago that research data management represents a new strategic service area for university libraries, one that requires new competencies and institutional collaborations.

The FAIR principles provide the defining framework for the international approach to research data management. According to Wilkinson et al. (2016), research data must be findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable. The significance of the FAIR approach lies in the fact that it interprets the management of digital objects not merely as a matter of storage, but as a set of conditions for future discoverability, machine processability and reuse.

In this context, the practical application of RDA and the issue of complete document representation cannot be viewed as a narrowly defined cataloging subproblem. In the digital information environment, the quality of metadata directly influences the discoverability, linkability and machine interpretability of content. Cataloging is thus increasingly becoming part of the construction of digital knowledge infrastructure.

The "Community – Local Identity – Social Engagement" section focused on the social embeddedness of libraries. The library situation in Hungarian-populated settlements in Slovakia, the activities of the Hungarian Cultural Institute of Vojvodina, the community-building practices of municipal libraries, university library needs assessments and the topics of early childhood music education and concert pedagogy can all be interpreted within a common theoretical framework.

This framework views the library as social infrastructure and as a cultural intermediary institution. Van Melik and Merry's (2023) research further nuances Klinenberg's (2018) theory of social infrastructure: the transformation of public libraries into social infrastructure is not an automatic process, but rather the result of deliberate spatial planning, service development and community practices.

It becomes particularly evident in the case of Hungarian communities across the border that the library does not merely provide documents but also ensures linguistic and cultural continuity, preserves local memory and supports community identity. In this context, library services also fulfill a function of cultural sustainability.

The emergence of user needs assessments within this same thematic framework highlights that community engagement cannot be based solely on institutional assumptions. Modern library service development must be grounded in empirical user knowledge, feedback and participatory approaches.

The **"Librarian Competencies and Professional Development" section** focused on one of the profession's most critical issues. The podcast as a cultural medium, librarian competencies in the digital age, the model of librarian education in Hungarian higher education and the impact of artificial intelligence on education collectively indicate that the professional identity of librarians is undergoing a significant transformation.

According to Lankes's (2011) new theory of librarianship, the contemporary librarian is simultaneously an information specialist, digital mediator, educator, trainer, community organizer, content creator and innovator. However, this expansion of competencies does not mean that traditional professional knowledge is being pushed into the background. On the contrary: the evaluation of credible sources, knowledge organisation, bibliographic control and user-centered service form a stable professional core upon which new competencies can be built.

The impact of artificial intelligence on librarian education is therefore not merely a matter of introducing new courses. It requires deeper curricular change. Future librarians must understand the functioning, limitations, biases, ethical issues and societal impacts of algorithmic systems. AI competence cannot be reduced to the use of tools; it also has critical, ethical and epistemological dimensions.

One of the most important professional contributions of the **"Social Utility – Sustainability" section** was that it framed the concept of library value as a matter of measurement and evaluation. ROI metrics, the social utility of traditional and digital services, the B2B2C model and green library practices all reinforced a complex understanding of sustainability.

The social value of libraries has traditionally been difficult to express in terms of financial metrics. The number of visits, the number of loans or the number of event participants are important performance indicators, but on their own they do not show what kind of change the library brings about in the lives of individuals and communities.

Aabø's (2009) meta-analysis summarising library ROI studies showed that examining the economic value of libraries can provide a strong argument for demonstrating the social return on public funding. At the same time, we must also be mindful of the limitations of the ROI approach: the social value of libraries cannot be reduced solely to monetary benefits. Democratic participation, the reduction of

information inequalities, cultural access and social cohesion are difficult to express through a single financial indicator.

For this very reason, the conference presentations on ROI and social utility can be interpreted as part of a broader professional shift: libraries must increasingly make visible not only their activities and performance but also their impact. The question is no longer merely how many services were provided, but also what changes these services brought about in users' knowledge, competencies, social participation or quality of life.

Another dimension of sustainability was represented by green library practices. According to IFLA's approach to sustainable development, libraries can be both environmentally conscious institutions and mediators of sustainability knowledge. This means that the concept of a "green library" is not limited to energy efficiency: it also encompasses access to environmental information, shaping community attitudes and promoting sustainable lifestyles.

The "Community – Community Creation – Community Learning" section illustrated the transformation of the library learning environment through examples of folk tales, children's library practices, multisensory storytelling techniques, the "Mesepárna" (Story Pillow) and Hungarian folk tales presented using robotic devices.

The significance of these programs lies in the fact that they do not interpret reading and the transmission of cultural content exclusively as verbal or text-based processes. Methods that engage multiple senses – and are action-oriented, playful and technology-supported follow the logic of multimodal learning.

From the perspective of a participatory approach, it is particularly important that the user appears not as a passive recipient but as an active participant. This idea is linked to the concept of the "participatory library," according to which the library's services, content, and community processes are increasingly shaped by the involvement, collaboration and creative participation of users.

Folk tales presented using robotic devices illustrate particularly well that tradition and technology are not necessarily opposites. In this case, the digital device does not replace cultural heritage but creates new opportunities for access and interpretation. This approach highlights one of the key principles of library innovation: the professional value of technology lies not in the technology itself, but in the learning, cultural or community processes it supports.

The workshops were particularly important elements of the convention's knowledge-sharing structure. Measuring staff satisfaction, memory enhancement, a university project supporting the use of AI, a library board game, a local history video archive, the Clarivate ecosystem and robotics and VR tools for developing digital literacy seemed to represent different subject areas.

Their common feature, however, is action-oriented knowledge transfer. While a lecture is primarily a reflective and discursive format, a workshop is a space for experimentation, collaborative problem-solving and experiential learning. This is

particularly important in a period of rapid technological change, when professional development cannot be limited to the acquisition of theoretical knowledge.

The topic of employee satisfaction brought the issue of organisational sustainability into the program. After all, technological innovation cannot be sustained without an appropriate human resources strategy. The future of the library is not just a matter of systems, platforms and digital tools but also of staff motivation, job security and opportunities for professional development.

The workshop on artificial intelligence and the presentation of the Clarivate ecosystem addressed the same question from different angles: how can the library profession integrate new technologies critically and competently? The hands-on demonstration of robots and VR devices, meanwhile, reinforced the experiential dimension of digital competency development. In these programs, the library is presented not as a technological showroom, but as a low-threshold community space for digital access, experimentation and learning.

Cultural Programs and Local Engagement

The professional program of the itinerary convention was complemented by a rich cultural offering. Walking tours organised in Kecskemét's historic downtown, presentations of the Katona József Library, the János Neumann University Library and the library of the Kecskemét Reformed Elementary School, a visit to the visitor center of the renovated city hall, the theater performance, the storytelling pub, the folk music and folk dance programs, and the excursions all combined to highlight the city's cultural diversity.

These programs should not be viewed merely as accompanying events. The library profession is deeply rooted in a specific location: in every community, the library is part of the local cultural ecosystem. Getting to know the city therefore also means experiencing the social and cultural environment in which the host institution operates.

From this perspective, Kecskemét offered a particularly rich experience. The historic downtown, the Art Nouveau architectural heritage, the musical and literary traditions, the folk art culture, the university presence and modern industrial development all contribute to a city identity in which the past and the future are not presented as mutually exclusive categories.

At the same time, the cultural programs reinforced the conference's role as a networking event. For the approximately 750 participants, in addition to the professional presentations, personal encounters, informal conversations and the Friday evening social gathering served to strengthen ties within the professional community. After all, knowledge in the library profession does not flow exclusively through publications and formal presentations: a significant portion of it is disseminated through personal connections, institutional collaborations and informal professional networks.

Conclusions: The Library as an Adaptive Social Knowledge Infrastructure

Based on the professional program of the 57th Hungarian Librarians' Itinerary Convention, several general conclusions can be drawn.

First, it is safe to say that the digital transformation of libraries can no longer be limited to technological developments. Digitisation, integrated platforms, artificial intelligence, research data management and metadata standards collectively signal a structural transformation of library operations. Technology does not simply add new tools to existing services; it also reshapes the concepts of collections, documents, access, authenticity and professional mediation.

Second, the professional competency profile of librarians is expanding significantly. In addition to the traditional knowledge of information organisation and resource mediation, AI literacy, data management, digital pedagogy, community development, content creation and project-based work are becoming increasingly important. This process also poses a fundamental challenge for librarian education: the curriculum must simultaneously preserve the profession's foundations in knowledge management and respond to the new technological and social environment.

Third, the community function is not a supplementary service but rather a central element of a library's identity. Examples of local identity, cultural heritage, innovation in children's libraries and Hungarian communities across the border demonstrate that the library is an infrastructure that fosters social cohesion. To use Klinenberg's (2018) terminology, it is a form of social infrastructure whose importance is particularly appreciated in a social environment that is becoming increasingly fragmented, individualised and mediated by digital technology.

Fourth, the concept of sustainability in librarianship is multidimensional. It encompasses environmental responsibility, economic rationality, social utility, organisational resilience and human resource sustainability. The topics of green library practices, ROI measurements and employee satisfaction are therefore not separate issues but rather different aspects of the same institutional sustainability question.

Fifth, one of the most important lessons from the conference as a whole is that the future of the library cannot be defined by dichotomies such as "digital or physical", "traditional or innovative" or "books or technology". A successful library is precisely one that is capable of integrating these dimensions. The use of robotic devices to present folk tales, the local history video archive, VR-based skills development, RDA and research data management all demonstrate that the essence of library innovation lies not in the elimination of tradition, but in the creation of new forms of representation, access and participation.

Sixth, a conclusion that can be drawn from the program as a whole is that the future legitimacy of libraries increasingly depends on making their social impact visible. It is not enough for libraries to document what they do; it is also becoming increasingly important to demonstrate the changes they bring about. This approach signals a shift from performance measurement to impact measurement.

The 57th itinerary convention held in Kecskemét, attended by some 750 professionals from Hungary and the Carpathian Basin, was therefore not merely a large-scale gathering of the Hungarian library community. A professional self-image emerged from the program as a whole in which the library is presented as an adaptive social knowledge infrastructure: it simultaneously preserves cultural memory, ensures access to information, develops competencies, supports research, builds community and contributes to sustainable social development.

In this sense, the central thematic triad of the 57th Kecskemét Convention – knowledge, community and sustainability –was not simply three conference concepts listed side by side. They represent the three mutually dependent dimensions of a new library paradigm. Without being embedded in a community, knowledge can lose its social relevance; without a credible knowledge infrastructure, a community can become vulnerable; and sustainability is inconceivable without either of these.

Kecskemét and the Katona József Library did more than simply provide a venue for the profession's discourse. The city's cultural heritage, innovative character, institutional diversity and the host library's community-centered operations have themselves become an example of the very approach the conference addressed: the library of the future can reinvent itself while preserving its cultural responsibility, strengthening its social ties and remaining open to new forms of knowledge, technologies and community needs.

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