



## **Wartime Role for Ukraine Libraries**

**Interview with Nick Poole, CEO  
CILIP, the UK library and information association**

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**KENNEALLY:** Libraries are meant to be places of peace and for peace – so much so, in fact, that it seems inconceivable that libraries could have any place in war. Yet today across Ukraine, libraries are places for refuge from and resistance against the Russian invasion.

Welcome to Velocity of Content. I'm Christopher Kenneally for CCC.

The Ukrainian Library Association represents 57,000 librarians and more than 33,000 libraries across the country. Its official website may be offline, but photos and posts to the ULA Facebook page make clear that Ukrainian librarians still manage to offer a host of services, from emergency medical training to providing access to trusted news sources.

In a recent essay for *The Scotsman* newspaper, Nick Poole, CEO of CILIP, the UK library and information association, has shared a series of moving exchanges with Ukrainian libraries. His besieged colleagues, says Poole, fear attacks on libraries not simply for the damage done to books and buildings, but because the intention is to erase Ukrainian culture, literature, and language. Nick Poole joins me now. Welcome to the program.

**POOLE:** Thanks, Chris. Great to be with you.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, we're very happy you could join us to share this story. On February 28th, four days after the Russian invasion, you posted a tweet about Ukrainian librarians that has since earned 200,000 likes and 30,000 retweets. It's gone viral, but I'd appreciate it if you would read it for me.

**POOLE:** Thanks, Chris. Absolutely. I don't think when I first sent this tweet I expected it to travel around the world. But it says, "bloody hell, looking at a message from the Ukraine Library Association concerning the cancellation of their forthcoming conference. It basically says we will reschedule just as soon as we've finished vanquishing our invaders. Ukrainian librarians, I salute you."

**KENNEALLY:** So that was a message of defiance, a message of resistance. What did it mean to you as a librarian hearing from librarians in the Ukraine?



POOLE: It meant so much to me. I think it spoke to a defiance and a spirit not just in the political rhetoric in Ukraine, or indeed in the militaristic rhetoric, but right at grassroots, at bedrock, in the hearts and minds of librarians. Maybe people wouldn't always think of librarians as being part of that sort of civic response to an invasion, but these were people who were proud, who were determined, and who were declaring to the world, we're not going to take this. And it just made me intensely proud of the profession that we're all a part of.

KENNEALLY: And they have been hard at work in Ukraine. Librarians have in fact recast libraries in many different ways. So I wonder if you could tell us about the ways that libraries there have been transformed in just days.

POOLE: Sure. Of course. Obviously, it's a very difficult, very dynamic picture over there, and we really first and foremost hope for the safety and well-being of our colleagues in Ukraine. I think it's fair to say that the impact has been felt in different parts of the country to different degrees. But some of the things we've been seeing – we've seen public libraries that have turned into shelters, including some at the cities that are being shelled. We've seen photographs of libraries running children's sessions, activities, play sessions for very small children in really challenging circumstances. We've seen libraries providing medical information, helping people to get online. We've seen quite a few maintaining communications infrastructure so that people can contact friends and family. And we've seen, actually, a whole part of the Ukrainian library community mobilize to combat disinformation. There's obviously a lot of state-sponsored fake news and disinformation flying around. They're there right in the middle of it all, helping people tell fact from fiction.

KENNEALLY: And they are doing that while under attack. What do librarians in Ukraine tell you about what they feel these attacks on libraries represent?

POOLE: I think right from the very early days, when we started communicating with my counterpart, the director of the Ukraine Library Association, there's a sense of outrage and injustice first and foremost – that Ukraine has come to see itself as a sovereign nation with a belief in a democratic way of life, with freedom of access to information. So they feel that this is, I think, an expansion of a conflict that's been going on in some ways since 2014.

But I think their real concern is that this isn't about territory. It's not about some old connection with Russia and former territories. It's about erasure. It's about erasing the idea of Ukraine as a free and independent sovereign nation. Ukraine has a literary tradition, a cultural identity, a strong and proud tradition of language and creativity. And I



think the real fear is that that's going to be erased as Russian forces make their way through the country.

KENNEALLY: You have asked librarians in Ukraine what we can do from outside the country. What did they tell you?

POOLE: First and foremost – and it's a hard response to hear – but their view, I think rightly, is that this is a humanitarian crisis, that the first response has to be humanitarian. We have to raise funds, provide support, make sure that we're trying to support the push to politicians to protect life and limb. But I think as well that the message that came out very clearly is we need to keep talking about Ukraine. We need to use our voices, our channels, our words to remind people what's happening, to remind people of the work that librarians are doing on the ground in Ukraine to support their communities, and essentially to keep the idea of Ukraine alive in people's hearts and minds.

And then they've also said – and I think this is in keeping with the original tweet as well – there will be a time to rebuild. There will be a time when they've recovered their territory. And there, they're hoping to look to us for a professional response. How can we help rebuild Ukrainian libraries, Ukrainian culture? But right now, I think protecting people is the first priority and then making sure that Ukraine doesn't get overwhelmed in this war of attrition and erasure.

KENNEALLY: In your essay for *The Scotsman*, you make the point that librarians have frequently played a role not only during war, but in the postwar environment to help bring countries back together. And I think you feel that libraries in Ukraine will be important when the war is over, too.

POOLE: Completely essential. I've worked in South Africa, where we've seen libraries operating as places of reconciliation post-apartheid. We've seen in Darfur, for example, where libraries have been established by the UN as libraries of peace, bringing people back together. And I think it's going to be totally essential. It's partly the safe and trusted library in the community, but it's also the continuity of the public record. People are going to need continuity of access to their information – their birth, deaths, marriages, and bank accounts. And I think libraries are going to be completely essential to helping Ukraine as a nation rebuild, and then communities within Ukraine to recover.

KENNEALLY: What kind of contact are you able to maintain at this point with your colleagues and with the Ukrainian library community?

POOLE: In the early days of the conflict, we reached out – I used to work a lot with Ukrainian colleagues in the European Commission, so reached out to old friends and former



colleagues. They were amazing. They were emailing from shelters underground in metro stations around cities in Ukraine. We're really worried. A lot of that communication has gone quiet. For example, the last message I received from one colleague was that she and a small team of her library colleagues were staying in Kyiv to continue to support efforts against disinformation. I haven't heard from her for eight days now. So it is very challenging.

That said, it is very clear that Ukraine intends to win its part of the information war. They are regularly in contact with the outside world. They're using communications where they can. Just this morning, for example, I was in contact with the deputy culture minister in Ukraine, who was talking about how their politicians, their stakeholders, are staying in region in cities to support the effort to push back against the invasion.

So we are worried. Communications are partial. But I think the Ukrainians have done an amazing effort in getting the message out about what's happening there.

KENNEALLY: Nick Poole, CEO of CILIP, the UK library and information association, thank you for speaking with me and sharing your stories.

POOLE: Thanks, Chris.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content from CCC.

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