

The Future of Libraries and Humanities Research: New Strategic Directions for the British Library

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The new chief executive officer of the British Library surveys the new directions for research in the humanities that are both under way and projected. Digital applications and collaborative partnerships are key elements.

I was very honored to receive an invitation to speak to this important international symposium on the future of the library. The invitation was (if I may say) well timed from a personal and British Library point of view. We have recently, as you well know, moved the British Library successfully into its new flagship building in London. Researchers love the reading rooms and the much enhanced quality of associated services, visitors marvel at the showcase exhibition galleries, and large parts of the library's collections are now housed in an environment fitting to their international standing. The building stands as a confident symbol of the importance of all libraries to cultural, educational, and economic success.

Yet it is at this very time of success that the British Library needs to turn to, and to accelerate, its engagement with the critical and transformational issues associated with the digital world and the new demands being made by our wide range of users and stakeholders. My arrival as chief executive in July this year has provided the opportunity for the library to focus on new strategic directions. And this symposium provides the opportunity for me to share some of our early thinking with you.

The Potential of ICT for Libraries

The British Library, as one of the world's foremost repositories of the written record and storehouses of the record of human intellectual achievement, is clearly a prime exemplar of the traditional concept of "the research library." However, that traditional institutional

concept of the research library is currently facing a fundamental challenge on two major fronts.

First, the rapid and inexorable increase in the world output of published materials, exacerbated by significantly higher than general inflationary price rises for library materials (particularly journals), means that research libraries generally are able to acquire a reducing proportion of the universe of material that they consider desirable to collect. This jeopardizes their traditional mission of building and maintaining comprehensive, self-sufficient collections for their users.

Second, research libraries face the challenge of determining how to respond to the rapid emergence of the new electronic information and communications technologies that suggest that scholarly access to intellectual content can now begin to be uncoupled from ownership of the material item. This shifts the focus toward ensuring effective access in a more collaborative networked environment.

For institutions like the British Library there will be a particular and heavy obligation, bestowed on them by virtue of the scope and nature of their unique collections, to play their full part in making their content available in electronic form as a contribution both to the global scholarly information resource and to the broadening of access to our cultural heritage.

The Potential of ICT for Humanities Scholarship

The touchstone for assessing the potential of the electronic information and communication technologies for scholarly usage and exploitation in the humanities is clearly whether evidence of scholarly advantage from their application can be demonstrated. The following list of advantages is readily identifiable although, no doubt, not fully comprehensive:

Reduced dependence on the library as a physical location. The availability of digital information resources over networks has the effect of bringing the library to the user. And rare and fragile materials can be made widely available as digital surrogates, thus protecting them from overhandling. While we might be hesitant about unreservedly embracing Anthony Appiah's "the library I never go to is already one of the most important places in my life,"¹ it is clear that the concept of "closeness to sources" is undergoing a fundamental transformation as increasingly scholars gain access to a global virtual library of a multiplicity of research resources.

Linking/integration. The electronic technologies enable scholars and librarians to integrate disparate resources both for analysis and

for communication via a single interface. Humanists are clearly as interested as scientists in having access to the full range of primary material underlying scholarly arguments, and the technologies have powerful potential for the comprehensive assembly of primary material and reassembly with works of synthesis and interpretation.

The illumination of new riches. Digital information resources enable scholarly analyses that could not previously be practically undertaken manually with information presented in their original formats. The clearest examples in the humanities are perhaps in the diverse array of applications of automated statistical, comparative, literary (e.g., authoring studies and thematic analysis), and linguistic analyses to electronic texts. The computer-aided analysis of text also strengthens traditional forms of research in that it offers a means of testing hypotheses against an entire corpus of material. Hence we have seen the creation of new electronic resources for scholarship such as the Folger Shakespeare and the British National Corpus. Digital restoration/enhancement and image processing also have scholarly potential for enhancing our knowledge and understanding of textual meaning.

Opportunities for wider audiences. The new technologies also offer a huge opportunity (and communication challenge) to the scholar to reach wider audiences since information once only available to research will increasingly be directly available to all. I plan to return to this theme later.

Collaboration and Partnership

To continue to play a crucial role against the backdrop of this rapid change and great uncertainty, closer collaboration between the librarian and the scholar—and with the technology—will be needed if libraries are to evolve their roles and to respond appropriately to users' new information requirements. Given both the expense involved in large-scale creation or provision of access to new electronic content and also the importance of that content to innovative scholarship, there is need for a new, closer partnership between the scholarly community and research libraries.

But the scholarly information landscape is not bounded by national borders, as some of the developments I shall describe later illustrate, and international engagement in the development of a distributed international electronic resource is crucial if the goal of

“local access to global collections” is effectively and efficiently to be realized. The United Kingdom is perhaps uniquely positioned in this regard to act as a bridge between the North American and the European research communities, as is the British Library, notably through its membership in the Research Libraries Group, the Conference of European Research Libraries, and the Conference of European National Librarians.

New Strategic Directions for the British Library

This, then, is a major backdrop to and driver of our current strategic thinking in the British Library. We believe that we are engaged in a strategic journey that recognizes the centrality of the Web to our future and seeks gradually to reposition the British Library as a key player in a multiplicity of collaborative arrangements within national and international networks of libraries, with scholars and researchers, and with other public and private sector bodies to ensure the timely provision of appropriate services.

Our emerging strategy gives stronger emphasis to building a wide range of partnerships, collaborations, and joint ventures; repositioning the British Library more closely within the national (and international) library system; ensuring that we play our full part in our government’s widening access agenda; accelerating our e-strategy, making the Web central to our service delivery, organizational priorities, and curatorial and other skills development. This implies a larger focus on e-strategy, including digitization and digital collecting; more emphasis on presentation of the British Library’s collections in the context of other great collections and worthwhile resources worldwide; much more active use and development of navigational tools to assist users; and reaching out through the Web (directly and mediated through appropriate educational agencies and the public libraries) to a much wider public.

The British Library’s e-Strategy

Our e-strategy will be at the core of our work and will underpin many of our priority developments. First, and at the core of the British Library’s future relevance and mission, is the continuing effort going into ensuring that the United Kingdom will have an adequate system of legal deposit for an electronic age. Our collaboration with the other U.K. legal deposit libraries is critical to defining the framework for this and for devising a practical solution. Meantime, a code of practice for the voluntary deposit of nonprint publications has

been agreed as an interim measure, endorsed by publishing trade bodies, the legal deposit libraries, and our sponsoring government department, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). This voluntary approach has a major advantage of slow build-up, a period in which the publishers and ourselves can develop greater understanding of all the issues involved in digital deposit, from metadata collection through to preservation, and the resource implications of this work.

Our digital infrastructure is being critically enhanced by a multi-million-pound technology deal, just concluded with IBM, to provide a digital store that will form the technical platform to support the British Library's acquisition and preservation of collection materials in digital form, together with digitized elements of its own historical collections. The Digital Library System will be designed using the Open Archival Information System (OIAS) reference model and will build on the work of the CEDARS digital preservation project, within which the British Library acts as a test site. The national library of the Netherlands, the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, has embarked simultaneously on a similar project with IBM, and we envisage working in close collaboration with KB as we move into uncharted digital territories. We will hope to contribute to, and share findings from, the international digital preservation research agenda, not least by providing an excellent test bed for such work.

The British Library is also pursuing new opportunities for digitization of its collections. We were encouraged by a recent House of Commons Select Committee report, primarily on public libraries but dealing with some British Library matters.² Let me quote from the report:

We strongly support the British Library in its endeavours to continue its digitalisation of internationally important books and manuscripts. We recommend that, wherever possible, those images should be freely available on the Internet. We consider that support for this process should be considered a high priority for Lottery or Government funding as appropriate. It should be the Government's avowed aim to establish the British Library as a hub for the United Kingdom and the international library network. This will enable the British Library to become a universal resource rather than the preserve of a relatively small number of users on the [St. Pancras] site—a library for the many not just the few. The expansion of the British Library's role should not be at the expense of and should in no way compromise the performance of the British Library's core statutory functions.

The British Library currently has two major multi-million-pound digitization bids in progress for lottery funding of nationally significant heritage material. We are leading a consortium of bidders on the theme of “a national sense of place,” illustrating the location and appearance of places within the United Kingdom. We are also a partner in a bid led by the Public Records Office on the subject of “moving here,” with content based on immigration to England. There are plans for the digitization of some 100,000 of our most attractive images to create a picture library, our early photographic collections are being put on the Web, and in collaboration with Keio University’s Humanities Media Interface Project both British Library copies of the Gutenberg Bible have been digitized, enabling scholars to compare copies virtually in ways previously impossible.

Collaborative e-Ventures in Support of Research and Scholarship

But the label of digitization hides rather deeper considerations and policy issues. While we wish to make a critical mass of digital material available in the interest of supporting both scholarship and the widening of access, we see limited merit in digitization without some coherence of purpose and integrity. With Cliff Lynch we believe that it is critical to “weave primary content with commentary, criticism, scholarship and instruction.” Materials digitized need to be described, related, contextualized, justified, and scoped. These are complex tasks involving, as I indicated previously, the need for a range of new collaborations with scholars, teachers, educational publishers, and so on. New models for these kinds of partnerships are international and complex: we need to share lessons on how to “repurpose” our materials and understand the range of business models appropriate for such ventures, particularly to ensure sustainability.

Let me share with you some examples of the library’s current involvement with such collaborations. The first is *Electronic Beowulf*, a joint project between the British Library and the University of Kentucky, led by Professor Kevin S. Kiernan of that university, the leading authority on the history of the manuscript. The project was funded by the British Library, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The *Electronic Beowulf* project belongs to a long tradition of technically aided exploration of the only known medieval copy of the *Beowulf* contained in a volume of the Library of Sir Robert Cotton, one of the British Library’s foundation collections. The eleventh-century

manuscript was badly singed and left smoke-stained and brittle by a fire in 1731. Damage to the manuscript's fragile edges in subsequent repeated handling resulted in the loss of hundreds of letters through crumbling before the text was finally stabilized in 1845. The *Electronic Beowulf* sought "to create an image edition which draws together and juxtaposes all the primary evidence for the transmission of *Beowulf*, and exposes the different layers of evidence on which the received text depends." Although the final result reflects Kiernan's vision of the manuscript, the creation of it required a new type of collaboration between scholar, curator, conservator, photographer, and technical expert. It was possible to bring to the *Beowulf* manuscript the two transcripts associated with the Danish historiographer Thorkelin (held in the Royal Library, Copenhagen) that describe its condition in the 1780s and early-nineteenth-century collations (held in Rutgers and Harvard Universities). Thus all the extant manuscript evidence for the history of *Beowulf* was brought together, with the digital technology providing the means for juxtaposition in ways that would not be possible even if all the volumes were to be physically assembled in one room.

My second example is the International Dunhuang Project, which is currently a showcased project within the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative led from the University of California, Berkeley. The International Dunhuang Project aims to bring together all the fifth- through tenth-century manuscripts and printed documents from Chinese Central Asia, in particular the 40,000 Buddhist manuscripts found in Cave 17 in Dunhuang, Gansu Province, now largely housed in four major institutions—the National Library of China, the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg—with smaller holdings elsewhere. None of the institutions can offer full access to its collections for one or more of the following reasons: the poor condition of the manuscripts, the lack of a complete finding list, and the policy of the institution. High-quality digital images will enable the electronic reassembly of the entire collection, providing scholars with access to the entire dispersed, fragile, and relatively inaccessible collections. The database will be available to scholars in a manner that will allow them to assist in developing it further, helping thereby to create a scholarly resource of use both to themselves and to others.

One of the arguments for international cooperation on this project was to increase, through collaboration, the potential for success in achieving fund-raising support. The project has already had substantial resourcing from the Mellon Foundation and from the Higher Education Funding Council for England, and with their continuing

and potentially extended support, we have every hope that this will be a digital scholarship project of immense international value.

A rather different example is Fathom, a recently announced partnership involving the British Library, Columbia University in New York, the London School of Economics, Cambridge University Press, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, and the New York Public Library, together with a growing number of cultural and educational contributors of international standing. It is intended that Fathom.com will provide access through its Website to a range of e-course and related content and will act as a high quality knowledge space. The British Library is actively developing digital content and a range of "stories" contributed by our curators, as "sticky" freely accessible content. Examples of "stories" include the diary of John Evelyn, the life of Oscar Wilde, Western manuscripts of the Bible, Victorian historical illustration, an introduction to incunabula, and so on.

e-Curatorship

I cite these examples particularly to lead into another facet of our e-strategy, namely, the recognition of the crucially important contribution our curators and bibliographers have to make in this new electronic environment. One of the greatest assets of the British Library, alongside its collections, is the expertise of our curatorial staff, many of whom are international scholars in their fields. They will have critical roles to play in realizing innovative international scholarship and research projects in the digital field, mediating access to distributed scholarly resources via national and international networks, brokering and mapping discipline-based collaborative collection development arrangements and entrepreneurial Internet ventures, and supporting wider public access to, and understanding of, our great collections in an e-setting.

Thus the traditional curatorial role needs to be reengineered for the new electronic environment, and we are currently refining the sets of skills and competencies needed for these new roles of brokering, interpretation, exploitation, and complex partnerships.

Collaboration with Higher Education

Collaboration and partnership with the higher education sector in the United Kingdom and more widely is a strategic priority. We are gradually building up, through dialogue and jointly funded studies, a shared agenda, based on increasing mutual understanding and

shared aims of providing for the student learner and for scholars and researchers the best possible integrated information infrastructure. This is a significant and positive shift of direction for the British Library and is being welcomed by the British government and the British library network.

The U.K. framework of the Distributed National Electronic Resource (DNER), sponsored by the Higher Education Funding Councils' Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), provides an excellent focus for dialogue and for a significant contribution to its fulfilment by the British Library. What is emerging is a shared agenda for development and the opportunity for the library to enrich services for researchers and students and for the incorporation of many of the offerings of the Distributed National Electronic Resource within the services offered to the wider user communities of the British Library. More specifically, we are offering to students and academics free desk-top access to table of contents data of some 15 million journal articles and conferences, all accessible from the British Library. We are also working to develop our electronic document delivery services as part of a distributed network of providers. In the area of portal development, we are contributing to the national Resource Discovery Network with its faculty/subject nodes, initially in the areas of complementary medicine and sustainable business; reciprocally, the library will embed aspects of this navigational service within its own portal to improve services to its reading room users and to its remote users. Ideas are emerging for collaborative ways of improving coverage of the British National Bibliography in the area of quality electronic resources evaluated and cataloged within the Resource Discovery Network. Potentially, the British Library can also enrich the Distributed National Electronic Resource through its special relationship with other national libraries.

A group of national libraries in Europe are in the final stages of negotiating a major European Commission-funded program for development of "The European Library," a pan-European digital national library for Europe that will provide open and seamless access to the digital resources of the major national libraries, with multilingual access, together with technical and business models that can be extended more widely.

I have so far deliberately focused on digital collaboration, but of equal significance is the progress being made, in partnership with British higher education, toward more collaboration in collection development and management. Recognizing that Panizzi's aspiration for the British Museum Library to be comprehensive in its collecting policies for all time has in practice for some time been unachievable

(despite a continuing commitment to high levels of acquisition), we intend to work closely with others to move toward a more integrated and distributed collections strategy nationally in which the British Library plays a leading role.³ This is of course sensitive territory and will require trust, dialogue, and flexibility as we aim together to provide the most effective collection coverage to support research and scholarship within the British research library system.

Collaboration for Wider Public Access

Developing as a national library “for the many” without detriment to the core statutory functions, as recommended by the House of Commons Select Committee report referred to above, and hence playing a greater role in the British government’s access and learning agendas represent unprecedented organizational and funding challenges for the British Library. Of course, we offer a range of facilities at St. Pancras for the general public, including exhibitions, public talks and lectures, and tours of the building. However, we envisage that the provision of digitized material from the British Library’s collections on the Web will clearly represent a major plank in scaling up provision to meet this new challenge.

We believe strongly that we need to develop partnerships with the public libraries in the United Kingdom as major agents in extending access regionally and within major cities through, for example, the People’s Network (the wiring up of all public libraries), through learning centers, and through traditional public library channels. To this end we have just announced a call for proposals within the library’s Co-operation and Partnership Programme, which will encourage practical manifestations of this outreach strategy.

Conclusions

This talk can only skim the surface of the developing strategic directions of the British Library. It has focused broadly on e-strategy as the engine for organizational and cultural change to meet the new challenges I outlined earlier but has inevitably been selective. There are strands of our strategic work in progress that I have paid little attention to here; they are important and will emerge in later iterations of our new strategic directions. I have stressed the importance of partnerships with both the scholarly and the research library communities as the library seeks to reposition itself more integrally in the national and international library network. At the same time we must seek to work with scholars and researchers to ensure innovative programs of

the highest international quality and scholarly value: the modernization and reinterpretation of the curatorial role is essential to achieve these objectives. We also believe that, primarily through digital developments, we can enable wider access to our collections, working closely with partners such as public libraries and public and private players in the education sector to “re-purpose and re-present” our offerings; such engagement will also inform priorities for our digital programs. I have skirted over the issues of organizational and cultural change needed to succeed, but the library does not underestimate their importance and the difficulty of the task.

We are entering into a range of discussions, debates, and dialogues on the nature and pace of our strategic development as a relevant national research library for the twenty-first century. I am therefore particularly delighted to be present at this timely and relevant symposium and to gain from all of your experience at this early stage of my tenure at the British Library. Our thinking, as presented to you today, is very much a work in progress, and comment and feedback at the symposium or later will be welcomed.

Notes

1. Anthony Appiah, “Realizing the Virtual Library,” in Lawrence Dowler, ed., *Gateways to Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).
2. House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *Report on Public Libraries* (HMSO, 2000).
3. “I want a poor student to have the same means of indulging his learned curiosity, of following his rational pursuits, of consulting the same authorities, of fathoming the most intricate inquiry as the richest man in the kingdom” (Antonio Panizzi).