
LIRG ANNUAL LECTURE

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"Challenges for the British Library in the 21st Century"

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The British Library's Strategic Plan will be going out to public consultation in May 2001. This talk highlights some of the issues addressed in the proposed strategic plan. The strategy is intended to address questions such as "What is a national library?" and "What is the national library's role in the new age?"

The strategy has been proposed against a background of:

- A rapidly changing environment – this includes the increase in digital content, political environment and agendas and the revitalised public library role. In addition there are many new entrants to the digital world competing with traditional service providers.
- Government drivers - DCMS funding, government priorities to widen access, especially through digitisation, the need for agencies and organisations to address the social inclusion agenda.
- Mature services in decline – Document supply service is now 40 years old, and they are in the process of looking at its role. They will be looking at other areas such as Bibliographic Services, and their role in the National Bibliography.

The BL also has a wide public programme as a cultural venue – hosting lectures, debates and exhibitions. In the UK, as the national library, they take the lead on the international front. They have received money from the EU for the creation of a EU virtual national library, along with eight other national library partners.

Our Vision

"Making the world's intellectual, scientific and cultural heritage accessible. The collections of the British Library and of other great collections will be accessible on everyone's virtual bookshelf – at work, at school, at college, at home"

The overarching vision of the BL's strategy is:

- Accessibility – balancing their collection remit with providing and increasing access (they see the web as central to being able to delivery this)
- Other collections – they recognise that the BL is not alone in collecting material, but in fact is part of, and integrated into, a larger network throughout the country.

Strategic directions

Enabling strategies

- User focus – they don't feel that they know enough about their users or non-users. They are looking for a more systematic approach to market research to enable them to take a more strategic view of their users and user requirements, and to follow a more "joined up" approach to answering those needs. They do know that users do value the BL brand
- Partnerships – they are looking to initiate and maintain partnership. "The British Library should do nothing on its own". How this is embedded is a challenge. Central to all their work is the ideal of partnership and collaboration. They are aiming to have a more seamless interface between their research collections and that of the HE research collections. They already have some excellent examples in this area to build on, for example JISC, BL CPP, NELH, DNER, digital preservation, storage, Newsplan.
- Web focus – "e-everything" is at the core of their new strategy. They would like to move to web admissions, and use the web to make the BL seem less elite. There are many early digitisation projects with an international perspective, and fathom.com

was set up as a knowledge and e-learning site. They plan to target the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) for priorities to digitise items.

- Shifts they need to make
 - o User focus – be more outward looking, not internally centered
 - o Partnerships – be collaborative, not stand alone
 - o Web focus – be Web-centred, not Web marginal

BL's unique responsibilities

Unique responsibilities – these include legal deposit; they are also advocating and lobbying to gain legal deposit for electronic information. They have a unique responsibility to provide ready access to the knowledge base (to do this, they are considering more collaborative collection development).

Comparative advantages

These include the unique and extensive collections, backed up by the interpretive expertise of the staff. The BL also has a global presence among libraries, flagship premises in London and the BL brand.

Collections strategy

A collection strategy is a must, as there is no discernible slowing down of the printed output, and the BL do not have space or capacity to store everything. Automation of the reading rooms means they have data on the readers. This has shown that, for example, most readers research in the English language, yet the collections are developed in a variety of languages. They really do need to define priorities:

- To work in partnership to share collecting responsibilities
- To focus on user needs and become more selective in what is collected
- To improve national coverage if and where they can

Access strategy

- Access is at the core of the overall strategy, and also influences the collection strategy
- They see their users in 3 main groups:
 1. Information seeker
 2. General public
 3. Schools

They have obtained *Invest to Save* funding along with the ONS and the PRO to provide digital primary resources for school children.

Research requirements

The BL has identified a number of areas where research will be required to support their strategy. These include

- Public v. private relationship with regard to digital development – what are the sustainable business models?
- Information / document provision to support the scientific community (the community has large datasets, which - due to the lack of electronic legal deposit - the BL does not have, so long term preservation for the nation is in question).
- Engagement with non-users.
- Digital preservation.
- Centralised v. distributed remote document supply.

New organisational structure

A new organisational structure is being put in place - essentially to support the Strategy. There is an emphasis on scholarship, with the value of the Curators being recognised.

The consultation document will be available in May 2001, and comments are invited on the emerging strategy.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Q: With regard to collaboration and partnership, especially with library collections, what sort of relationship do you envisage between HE and national collections?

A: See the BL working actively through Brian Follett's Group to set up collaborative ventures (such as RSLP, BL CPP). Do feel there are opportunities to map public library's collections on a regional basis; HE mapping for subject coverage.

Q: Where do you see the interaction between library users and software builders? What is the national library's role?

A: Librarians need to work as part of a multi-skilled team to provide and promote digital scholarship. This is an area of huge opportunities.

Q: What about the tensions between scholars and the curatorial role in the BL, and the management skills each set needs?

A: Believe that the BL needs to manage the different value sets. LB does not feel that promotion should only be through the management route but that, for example, curators can be promoted in their curatorial role, as not everyone has management skills or desires to move into management. There is a balance to be maintained between skilled management and continuing to make efficiency gains, yet promoting innovative work.

Q: How does the BL identify users and prove they are meeting the social inclusion agenda?

A: They are collaborating with the public library sector, using the People's network Online as leverage to increase inclusivity. They have also examined the DCMS paper and have decided to focus on a selection of identified groups such as people with disabilities, Bengali groups, and they are working with Camden and Hackney at a local level.

Q: What about the partnership with authors and the publishers?

A: The BL already has a partnership with a microfilm publishing group. There is no doubt they need a good relationship with publishers. They also collaborate in the area of legal deposit. With regard to partnerships with authors and the publishing sector they are working to find mutual benefits.

Q: Looking at the area of social inclusion, how do they know who the excluded are, and how are they setting about to identify them?

A: The BL have identified three areas to target in the first instance and will be measuring their progress in the three selected areas, before moving on. In addition they have a priority to identify non-users, which will also help inform their targeting of identified groups.