



GOING GLOBAL

With the ALIA National 2014 Conference in Melbourne only days away, our series of articles featuring the conference keynote speakers concludes this month with Roly Keating, Chief Executive of the British Library.

Roly Keating joined the British Library in 2012 after a long and successful career at the BBC. Since then he has overseen a series of significant developments, including an historic move to large-scale digital collecting with the implementation of the Non-Print Legal Deposit regulations, the incorporation into the library of the Public Lending Right service, the closure of the historic Colindale site and the opening of the Newsroom, a new reading room at St Pancras dedicated to news collections across all media formats.

These activities and projects attest to the rapidly changing operating environment in which our services operate. *INCITE* asked Roly about the British Library's strategic planning process and the keys to thriving in the new globalised world.

Q. TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT THE CURRENT STRATEGIC PLANNING ACTIVITY EXPLORING THE BRITISH LIBRARY'S ROLE IN THE NEXT 5–10 YEARS?

A. We're currently in the midst of a considerable period of strategic planning, as part of a project to develop a new vision and strategy for the library as we move towards our 50th birthday in 2023.

We have done a lot of work determining what we think the core function of the British Library is, and why we are here in the first place – an important task to do, even for an institution with roots as deep as ours. A vision has emerged from this, of the British Library with a range of different purposes in the 21st century. We have our long-established role as custodians to preserve, collect and protect our collections and as a hub for researchers worldwide, but we're also here for schools, businesses, the creative industries and people living across the UK. At the heart of these purposes is our commitment to making our intellectual heritage available to absolutely everyone, for research, inspiration and importantly, enjoyment.

We're currently at a very interesting stage in the process, using ideas gathered from across the library about what our plans and projects should look like for this next 10 year period. There have been some strong, striking ideas generated so far, and we're entering into a period of analysis about how to move forward, before publishing our strategy in early 2015.

Q. WHAT HAS SURPRISED YOU MOST DURING YOUR RESEARCH TO DEVELOP THIS PLAN?

A. There have been many surprises – I've been taken aback by the originality and vibrancy of the ideas, thoughts and opinions coming through from the organisation about what the British Library means to our staff, and what they think we should be doing to improve and diversify our offer in the future.

I've also been pleased to see overlap between a few key strands of thought about the library's culture and reach coming from different areas of the organisation, which makes identifying our next steps easier to take.

Q. WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OR ATTRIBUTES OF A GLOBALISED WORLD THAT LIBRARY AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS NEED TO UNDERSTAND?

A. In the past, everyone who needed to use a library had to physically make a journey to visit their building. Now thanks to the enormous freedom enabled by digitisation, we have the potential to bypass all those restrictions and go to people anywhere, turning us from the library of the few, to the library of the many. This in turn has a major impact for every library, as we stop being the library just for our country or city, and begin thinking of ourselves as a library for the world.

Secondly, the concept of memory is changing. In the past researchers using libraries tended to use official records, documents and manuscripts written by the learned. Now history is written by everyone, as we've seen recently in the cogency of the individual narratives coming out of the letters, postcards and poetry relating to the First World War in the British Library's collections. In full circle, to mark the centenary of WWI, over the next four years we're archiving hundreds of UK websites to capture the digital responses to the anniversary in the 21st century. As libraries we need to recognise this and anticipate the changing needs of future generations of historians and scholars, and alter how we operate so that we can meet the future demands of a new research community.

Finally, digital access to collections changes the expectations of your users, and how, when and where they want to use library collections. Libraries need to be responsive to changes in demand, access and technology to remain relevant now and in the future.

Q. WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MOST IMPORTANT RECENT INNOVATIONS THE BRITISH LIBRARY HAS MADE TO THRIVE IN THIS GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT?

A. We continue to build outstanding global partnerships which are crucial to our success. This is especially important in a time of austerity and budget cuts, where we need to innovate and work with different organisations in order to deliver.

A prime example of this is our partnership with the British Newspaper Archive (via DC Thomson), who are digitising up to 40 million pages from our newspaper collection over 10 years, which are made available online to their subscribers for a fixed period, but available for free in the British Library Reading Rooms. We are also undertaking a £8.7m project with the Qatar Foundation to digitise half a million pages from our collections relating to Gulf history. The results will be launched online later this year in a portal offering access to the material for both Arabic and English audiences. These projects have transformed access and usability of collections which would otherwise be restricted to users in the library's sites in London and Yorkshire.

Another major innovation for the British Library was the passing of new government regulations in April 2013 which gave the library, as well as five other legal deposit libraries, the right to collect digitally published material from the UK, including 4.8 million websites. Under the conditions of the new law, we will be only be making the digital material available on library premises and so it is limited, but it remains an enormous achievement for the UK library network and prevented a digital 'black hole' occurring in our 21st century collections.

A more recent success has been the more experimental projects coming from our team of digital scholars. They are using the fruits of mass digitisation, for example 68,000 books digitised by Microsoft in 2009, and manipulating their metadata to come up with new and creative ways of sharing the content with people. Examples include the

upload of more than one million images from the digitised books onto Flickr Commons under a public domain license, opening up a world of creative re-uses and mash-ups of the content from people around the world, and creating a 'mechanical curator' tool which randomly plucks an image an hour and tweets it to the world. It's becoming more evident that for future generations of researchers, digitisation isn't enough – we will also need to consider how to best exploit the accompanying data and make it part of the package for researchers.

Q. IN YOUR VIEW, DO THESE INNOVATIONS ILLUSTRATE A CHANGE OF DIRECTION OR A CONSOLIDATION OF TRADITION?

A. This depends on your interpretation of a traditional library, which is never a fixed thing.

In many ways, everything we are doing now remains part of our core purpose as a library – we collect, preserve, and provide access to information. It is just that technology has blasted open the constraints previously imposed on this, and empowered us to deliver this in ways that couldn't have been imagined by librarians a century ago.

Despite all the negative predictions about libraries in the digital age, at the British Library the reading rooms remain a very well used resource, with around half a million visits each year, demonstrating that there is still a demand for the physical book, pamphlet or manuscript.

The new challenge (and opportunity) for libraries is developing ways to bring to life the printed item with the digital and make them work together, not apart. Technology is a fantastic enabler of cross-disciplinary connections, breaking down typical higher education subject areas and empowering researchers to make new and innovative connections across content.

We've seen this already with successful projects the library has run like the Georeferencer project, which asked volunteers to take digitised historic maps from our collections and use georeferencing software to 'map' them onto modern digital maps. I'm confident that these creative print/digital solutions will continue to thrive as the library sector evolves.

Q. AND FINALLY, WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE THING ABOUT THE BRITISH LIBRARY?

A. Its sheer unpredictability: the collections are so vast and wide-ranging that you never know what issue you might be dealing with next!

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Roly Keating's keynote presentation at the ALIA National 2014 Conference is sponsored by Bibliotheca.