
The British Library and its international collections

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Abstract:

The British Library has one of the largest and most important international library research collections in the world. This paper discusses the background to the creation of the Library's international collections and the Library's international purpose as part of its Living Knowledge vision. It reviews the range of international collaborations and partnerships which the British Library has developed to digitise and share the international collections and make them widely available. The paper considers a range of individual case studies which look at projects of different scale, with different funding models and designed to deliver different outcomes. The paper also considers the key challenges in developing international partnerships and the future direction of our work to develop a shared digital future for international library collections.

Keywords: British Library, international cooperation, mass digitisation projects, digitisation funding models, partnership.

The British Library and its international collections

British Library is the national library of the United Kingdom and one of the greatest research libraries in the world.

Like most national libraries our collection is based heavily on national legal deposit laws and voluntary deposit agreements. Under UK legal deposit regulations, the British Library is the primary place of deposit for published materials in the UK, together with the national libraries of Scotland and Wales, and the university libraries of Oxford, Cambridge and Trinity College Dublin.

However, our focus is not just publication from the UK or information about the UK. We also look after one of the greatest international research collections in the world. These collections reflect British culture and experience over centuries. They are collections built by individual people, by monarchs, by organisations and by government and therefore reflect our historical experience of the world. Because of the course of British history, they also reflect many other cultures and the historical experiences of many other communities around the world. Whether as part of a closely integrated medieval Europe, through centuries of exploration and

trade, through the impact and legacy of empire and colonialism, our collections are truly global in nature.

We are also very fortunate to have the legacy of a love and fascination for the act of collecting. Whether as a hobby for the rich and well-travelled of previous centuries, or the vision of previous generations of librarians, there is no doubt that the strengths of our international collections today owe a huge debt to the systematic and large scale building of collections from across the world by previous generations. From the vast European enlightenment library of King George III which became one of the foundation collections of the library of the British Museum (in turn, one of the foundation collections of the British Library) to the acquisition policies of Anthony Panizzi, Keeper of Printed Books in the mid 19th century, we have inherited an amazing legacy. Panizzi set out to make the Library one of the greatest in the world at that time by building a collection covering every language and every subject. He envisaged a library which collected *'from all quarters the useful, the elegant, and the curious literature of every language; to unite with the best English Library in England or the world, the best Russian Library out of Russia, the best German out of Germany..... and so with every language from Italian to Icelandic, from Polish to Portuguese.....'*

These collections do not just include text from printed books and manuscripts, but many other formats. The maps, prints, drawings, photographs, stamps and sound recordings also contribute a huge wealth of information about cultures and experiences around the world. There is hardly a place on earth, a faith tradition or a language that we cannot help scholars shed some light on.

Because of the strength of our international collections, we feel we have a very strong international purpose. We seek to work with partners around the world to advance knowledge and mutual understanding. This international purpose is a major part of our *Living Knowledge* vision for the work we will do to transform access to our collections in the coming years See <http://www.bl.uk/projects/living-knowledge-the-british-library-2015-2023> (retrieved 2 July 2016)

One way to get a flavour of the international range of our collections and the scholarship they enable is to look at the blogs written by our curators and guest researchers – See <http://www.bl.uk/blogs>. (retrieved 2 July 2016). As well as a wide range of stories directly from our Asian, African, European and Americas collections, you can also see the strong international flavour of current work from our manuscript, maps, music and sound teams. We find that blogs are a very successful way to broaden engagement and to complement both our physical exhibitions, major loans of items to exhibitions around the world and also to give context to some of the materials people will find through our digital search and discovery tools. Blogs from major international collaborative projects such as 'Endangered Archives' also illustrate the range of international research based on our work.

The collections are all freely accessible to anyone who needs them for research in our Reading Rooms. It is difficult to generalise about how the international collections are being used as researchers tell us that they value not only access to the unique items in themselves, but that they value having them available alongside such a large scale research library collection, including secondary scholarly publications from around the world, access to multiple formats and our research support services. What we do know is that just over 15% of people who registered with us in 2015 had a non-UK address, almost 7,000 people. This is an

increase on previous years so we do not seem to be any less in demand to internationally based researchers.

While onsite access remains important, we are focussing strongly on ways to increase online access. We believe we have an obligation to share these collections as widely as we can and reach new audiences. Online access gives us more opportunities to share in new and compelling ways – not only for academics and researchers but also to support culture, learning and understanding to far wider audiences, today and in the future.

International projects

Over the last 10 years we have been working on a range of digitisation projects through which we can share our international collections. Most of these projects are collaborative with other organisations and have been built on a range of partnership and funding models. They range in scale from the digitisation of an individual manuscript or a few rare books to digitisation of hundreds of thousands of pages of printed texts, archives and manuscripts.

Digitisation is expensive and the cost does not stop at the creation and hosting of images. To ensure we are giving access in a way that is meaningful to the different audiences now and in the future we need to think about the digital services through which materials are made available as well as their intellectual and scholarly context.

We do not receive systematic funding from the UK government for large scale digitisation so we have sought out collaborative partnerships as a way of developing these projects. As well as the British Library's aim to share our collections more widely, partners also bring their own aims and objectives, so projects can have many important outcomes. Partnerships have been developed in support of a range of objectives, including :-

- The preservation of fragile analogue artefacts (e.g. Endangered Archives)
- Digital reunification projects to reunify materials divided over time (e.g. International Dunhuang project, Mewar Ramayana digitisation)
- The creation of new digital corpus of materials not possible in the analogue world (e.g. Hebrew manuscripts digitisation)
- Enriching cultural awareness and sustaining cultures in rapidly changing societies (e.g. projects with Singapore, Qatar, India)
- Supporting reconstruction after disaster or damage (e.g. Iraq)

In developing these partnerships we have worked with a variety of funding models and with many different types of organisations including national libraries, archives, museums and universities as well as ministries of culture and education. We have also worked extensively with several philanthropic trusts and foundations, either supporting the British Library directly or supporting our partner organisations.

Case Studies

To illustrate the range of partnerships and the types of models we have developed, I would like to share a few case studies with you.

Case study 1: Gospels of Tsar Ivan Alexander of Bulgaria

While some small scale projects have digitised only a few manuscripts or texts, these are often of great significance to the partners. For example the British Library digitised the Gospels of Tsar Ivan Alexander of Bulgaria as part of our own mediaeval manuscript digitisation programmes, but shared the images with the National Library of Bulgaria, who are interested in obtaining copies of Bulgarian manuscripts from around the world. The manuscript has since been nominated for listing on the UNESCO Memory of the World register. See http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_39627 (retrieved 2 July 2016)

Case study 2: Singapore collections

Many of the projects have been funded by private philanthropic foundations or trusts. In many of these cases the donor wishes to support a fellow national library to develop their digital services. Access to relevant content digitised from the British Library's collections as well as other institutions' collections forms a part of their strategy. This is the case in a three year digitisation project with the National Library of Singapore funded by William and Judith Bollinger. Over its three years duration, the project has digitised a selection of materials from the British Library made by curators from the National Library of Singapore. The three phases cover digitisation of important Malay manuscripts, maps of Singapore and materials from the collections of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore. These materials will form part of the National Library's digital services on the history of Singapore.

Case study 3: Greek manuscripts

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation of New York has funded a major development project in support of the National Library of Greece. In parallel with this, they have also supported the digitisation of the British Library's collection of Greek manuscripts which date from the 3rd century BC to 1600 AD. The aim of the project is to make these freely available online and interpreted for researchers and the general public worldwide. Over 1000 Greek language manuscripts were digitised as part of this project. See <http://www.snf.org/en/grants/grantees/t/the-british-library/project-support/> and <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/> (retrieved 2 July 2016)

Case study 4: Hebrew manuscripts

The British Library's [Hebrew manuscripts collection](#) (retrieved 2 July 2016) is one of the finest and most important in the world. The collection is a vivid testimony of the creativity and intense scribal activities of Eastern and Western Jewish communities for over 1,000 years. It is also a good case study of how successive projects can amplify the benefits of improved access and research and scholarly services. Thanks initially to a major grant from The Polonsky Foundation and other funders the British Library ran a major project to conserve, catalogue and digitise 1,300 manuscripts from the collection. In a second follow-on partnership with the National Library of Israel, we are aiming to digitise at least 1000 more. The digital output of both projects will then be shared with the National Library of Israel for their International Collection of Digitized Hebrew Manuscripts.

These successive partnerships focussing on a collection area brings many important benefits. It fulfils the British Library's ambition to make this important collection more widely available. The further aggregation of our digitised Hebrew manuscripts with those of other institutions from around the world also supports the National Library of Israel's objective to provide a global online centre of Hebrew scholarship. The partnership has brought many benefits on both sides including sharing technical expertise and also scholarly experience and

knowledge about the nature of the content. The National Library of Israel will provide a new web space for Hebrew manuscripts, the International Collection of Digitized Hebrew Manuscripts. See <http://www.bl.uk/press-releases/2015/july/international-digital-library-of-hebrew-manuscripts> (retrieved 2 July 2016)

Case study 5: Gulf collections

One of the largest and most significant partnerships we have undertaken is with the Qatar Foundation and the Qatar National Library. As part of their objective to develop a Qatar Digital Library, the Qatar Foundation was keen to develop digital resources that explored the history of the Gulf region and also to share more widely the achievements of centuries of Arabic science. See <http://www.qdl.qa/en> (retrieved 2 July 2016).

The objective of the Qatar National Library is to transform the study of Gulf history by providing a world class resource available to everyone with an interest in Gulf region, from academic researchers to the general public, and through it to improve understanding of Arabic culture and heritage, of the Islamic world and modern history of the region. As well as official documents and Arabic manuscripts, the content includes photographs, maps and sound items covering a huge range of topics and subjects.

The partnership also supports the British Library objective to share its international collections, in this case the archive of the British East India Company and the India Office Archive as they relate to the Gulf region. As well as digitisation the partnership also includes the development of a digital library portal where a lot of thought has been given to the search and discovery needs of users. The British Library has also been privileged to support the Qatar National Library in their outreach and education work with schools and universities in Qatar to help students understand the context of the documents they now have available to them. Both the Qatar National Library and the British Library have worked with academics internationally to promote the content to academics and students of gulf history around the world.

This has been a ground breaking partnership which will hopefully be the model for further expansion of this important world class digital resource.

Case study 6: Indian printed books

The British Library holds the world's largest single collection of early printed South Asian - language books, many of which are now the only copies left in the world. It also holds over 20,000 Indian manuscripts, the earliest of which dates back 2,000 years and countless other materials from the region. Together, they form the most important collection outside of South Asia, enabling researchers to trace the roots of India's rich literary and cultural heritage. It has long been our ambition to make this vast intellectual and cultural resource available more widely, particularly to scholars and the public across South Asia.

In 2015 we established a major new programme of work 'Two Centuries of Indian Print' which aims to digitise over 140,000 printed books in over 20 South Asian languages covering the period from 1714-1914. We have started a pilot project, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and by UK government funding through the Newton Fund. This pilot will digitise 1,000 books in Bengali, amounting to 200,000 pages, as well as enhancing the catalogue records of more than 2,000 titles to automate searching and aid discovery by researchers. We also plan to work with partners in India, including Jadavpur University and the National Library of India to explore digital scholarship opportunities from

this corpus and to develop skills and digital research capacity. See <http://www.bl.uk/press-releases/2015/november/unlocking-indias-printed-heritage> (retrieved 2 July 2016)

Case study 7: Chinese collections

As part of its East Asian collections, the Library has a rich collection of materials from China and in the Chinese language, including over 450 oracle bones, major Dunhuang and Silk Road collections, as well as over 100,000 printed books and manuscripts.

One of the longest running and largest international collaborations based at the British Library is the International Dunhuang Project (IDP). See <http://idp.bl.uk/> (retrieved 2 July 2016). Originally established in 1994, IDP is an international collaboration to conserve, catalogue and digitise a range of materials from various archaeological sites along the Silk Road. The collaboration now involves over 22 institutions and the collections include manuscripts, textiles, printed texts, paintings and other artefacts. The project has been a major example of digital reunification and the way that digital technologies can be used to give access to fragile items spread across many individual collections. The project partners have depended on many sources of philanthropic and research funding over its 20 year history and continue to evolve their approach to funding as the project matures.

More recently the Library has been fortunate to have UK government support for the digitisation and cataloguing of our important collection of oracle bones. This project brought a number of benefits in collaboration with the National Library of China, where we were able to do skill sharing workshops and learn a lot about how they house and digitise their bones. The digitisation enabled 3D modelling of the bones and 3D printing which has completely transformed the ways in which we can engage with educational and learning audiences about these important collections items. See <http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/asian-and-african/2014/06/the-couling-chalfant-collection-of-oracle-bones-in-the-british-library.html> and <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/chinese-oracle-bone> (retrieved 2 July 2016)

Case study 8: Korean collections

The British Library has over 15,000 books and manuscripts representing Korean history and culture across several centuries, some of which are unique. We are entering a new partnership with the National Library of Korea who are interested in digital versions of materials not available in their own collections. They have selected a range of materials to digitise. Again this partnership supports the strategic aims of both institutions – that of National Library of Korea to be the international centre for online access to Korean materials and of the British Library to be able to share its collections more widely to scholars around the world. The project will also build on the work the British Library has done in recent years to complete the retroconversion of catalogue data about our Korean collections to ensure they were better known to Korean scholars from around the world. See <http://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/korean-collection> (retrieved 2 July 2016)

Case study 9: Endangered Archives

Endangered Archives is a unique programme established by the Arcadia Foundation in partnership with the British Library to support digitisation of endangered pre-industrial archives around the world. It is part of Arcadia's wider mission to protect endangered culture and nature. See <http://www.arcadiafund.org.uk/about-arcadia/about-arcadia.aspx> (retrieved 2 July 2016)

Over the past 10 years it has funded over 250 library and archival preservation programmes from all parts of the world. The programme is based on applications for grants for digitisation to be made by applicants very close to the materials at risk. While the British Library makes the digital copies openly available on-line, the physical materials always remain in situ and applications often provide for their own unique digital access. As well as the primary goal of preservation, there is also a very strong focus on building skills and capacity within the regions where the materials are located.

Since its inception, Endangered Archives has enabled over 5,000,000 images and thousands of sound recordings to be preserved and made available, providing a unique resource for research. Open access is a major objective of the programme so we are constantly looking into better ways to promote and raise awareness of them. The programme also hopes to involve more libraries and archives in regions with endangered pre-industrial archival materials to get involved and supports local archive owners, experts and scholars to apply for grants and to help design and deliver projects locally.

There are too many projects to list here but all can be browsed on the project website. See <http://eap.bl.uk/> (retrieved 2 July 2016). Some of the projects to be funded in the most recent funding round include political archives in Madagascar; Buddhist manuscripts in Buryatia, Siberia; ecclesiastical documents in Cuba; manuscripts from Nepal; archival documents on the Caribbean island of Nevis; and the archive of the Monastery of Dominican nuns of Santa Rosa, Santiago, Chile.

As well as text based archives, there are also large sound and photographic archives in the collection including the Syliphone recording label archive from Guinea, the Fouad Debbas collection of Ottoman era photographs from the Levant, ethnographic photographs from southern Siberia and the Odeon label shellac disks from India.

There is a lot of research into the impact and importance of this important programme. For further reading please see:

Maja Kominko (ed). "From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme". OpenBook. 2015. ISBN 9781783740635

Michele V. Cloonan, Rebecca McGuinness, Jody Butterworth, and Adam Farquhar, "Europe," in *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* Vol. 45.2 (2015): pp unknown.

Key challenges in international cooperation and partnership

The developments of partnerships and the delivery of shared projects are rewarding but can be complex and present several challenges to be overcome. Depending on the scale of the project, the nature of the collections and the objectives of the partners there can be operational, legal and cultural issues to manage.

I would highlight the following areas for particular attention in establishing digitisation partnerships

- Agreement on legal issues such as copyright, data protection and legal privacy rights. This is particularly important where copyright and other legal frameworks are different in the different countries involved. Copyright clearance operations may be a major cost for one or more of the partners.
- Clarity on funding and costing arrangements. Labour and other costs can vary enormously from one country to another and partners in different countries may not

realise why a shared project will cost some partners far more than others. Lack of guaranteed funding or a stop/start patchwork of funding arrangements for one or more partners may slow down a collaborative project or in some cases frustrate it altogether.

- Agreement on technical and workflow standards, especially where digital content will be made available through more than one digital library service or aggregated with other content. It is important to ensure that the content and metadata delivered as part of a shared project is as standardised as possible for future sustainability.
- Agreement on project governance and management arrangements. Project management cultures can vary from institution to institution, so agreement on issues such as selection of content, project milestones and deliverables from all partners are important from the start.

Our shared digital future

As shared and collaborative digitisation becomes a standard part of our working lives, we begin to realise the potential of large scale collections of digitised items to open up new knowledge and bring that knowledge to a new generation of researchers. No matter how historic or iconic the original physical materials are, digitised collections are ‘new’ collections to the global ‘Google generation’. Moreover they expect us to be able to deliver new tools and technologies through which these digital collections can be exploited more effectively. I believe there are two major challenges facing national libraries as we consider future models of mass digitisation.

Firstly, we need to understand the full potential of digital technologies and the growing expectation of digital scholars. While providing access from anywhere in the world to online versions of texts for simple reading or viewing in many cases is an improvement on having to travel to the home library of an item, international digital scholars are now wanting much more. We need to be able to satisfy those with a ‘telescopic’ view – those who want access and tools to data-mine and visualise very large-scale aggregations of digitised content, often in conjunction with born digital content. We also need to satisfy those with a ‘microscopic’ view – those who want to use digital applications such as digital microscopy and multispectral imaging to research between the lines and under the skin of manuscripts in ways too invasive or impossible through physical reading. As an international community we are very focussed on how we will fund digitisation but we must also consider how we will fund a continuous improvement in the functionality and power of the tools through which researchers access our shared digital collections.

Secondly we should collaborate more on shared priorities for future digitisation. National libraries have a particularly important role to play as our national collections complement and supplement each other, due to legal deposit basis of much collecting. Are there collaborative arrangements we can make between us bilaterally or multilaterally to digitise historic materials to make as complete national digital collections as possible?

At the British Library we know we have been very reactive in our digitisation to date, largely due to our dependency on philanthropic and research grants for funding much of what we have done so far. We are initiating a strategic review of our mass digitisation and working with the international research and library community to understand better what our future priorities should be. This strategic review, which we are calling ‘Heritage Made Digital’, will

identify where we should focus our own investment for maximum research benefit and also where we can most usefully work with partners around the world.

And can we work together to deliver a 'total' digital library? Can we join up our collections and services internationally so that anything a user wants can be digitised on demand? The IFLA international library community formerly had the concept of Universal Availability of Publications based on physical interlending as a core objective. Can we begin to translate this ideal into an international service based on digitisation for future generations? I do not underestimate the logistical, technical, legal and financial issues involved in developing such services. But only by putting international users at the heart of our digitisation services will we really have the capability to meet international needs.

Conclusion

For the British Library, international partnership has been and will remain a core part of our strategy to make our international collections available as widely as possible in a digital world. For reasons of history the collections of the British Library have relevance and meaning to people and communities around the world. We have a growing opportunity as well as a responsibility to bring these collections to life through digital technologies and to share them far beyond the walls of the library. We will continue to seek new partners around the world to work together on our shared objectives to advance knowledge and mutual understanding.