ICT, organizational change and the habitus of library professionals

The case of the British Library

Paper presented to the organizational change stream of the 22nd ANZAM conference,
University of Auckland Business School 1st -3rd December 2008

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which the British Library (BL) is using digital technologies to develop new forms of ‘virtual’ service delivery. The paper corroborates the idea that these new forms are being developed within a complex and inherently contested process of techno-organizational change – but it is also argued that scholarly access to information is being very substantially shaped by the ethical predispositions and professional identities of senior library curators. The paper draws on Bourdieu’s notion of a socially enacted habitus to show the ways in which the advocacy and constituency-building roles of these curators are allowing the BL to play a leading part in shaping the emergent ‘information society’ in the UK.

Keywords: technology, digitization, organizational change, institutions, professional identity, habitus
Introduction

The new information and communications technologies (ICTs) are currently playing a major role in redefining the role of national libraries and their place in the emergent ‘network society’. (Anttiroiko and Savolainen, 2007). The paper begins by raising some theoretical questions about the survival of large institutional providers of information in the digital era. The case study account of the British Library (BL) that follows encapsulates both the broader institutional scope of the digitization underway at the BL since 2001 and the micropolitics of one particular initiative, Collect Britain, a large (£5.6 million) externally funded project whose purpose was to provide web-based access to library resources for UK school age children and lifelong learners. Whilst previous work suggests that the new organizational forms associated with ICTs are being developed within a complex and inherently contested process of institutional change (Harris, 2008), the paper draws on Bourdieu’s concept of a social habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) to explore the idea that scholarly access to information is being very substantially shaped by the professional expertise and ethical predispositions of senior library curators. The case study findings are based on research carried out at the library’s main St Pancras site in central London. The paper also draws on published reports, policy documents, and web sources. A total of 18 semi-structured interviews were carried out with senior curators, and IT project managers as well as staff from the BL education and corporate affairs departments in 2003-4. The access developed allowed the author to conduct a series of follow-up interviews in early summer 2008.

Theoretical issues and analytic bearings

Recent years have seen a large volume of comment on the radically new, decentralized organizational forms that have emerged in the context of ‘global’ information networks and the rapid growth of the Internet. The widely-cited commentaries of Manuel Castells have added weight to the idea that highly devolved ‘post-bureaucratic’ modes of governance will provide the template for the emergent ‘network society’ (Castells, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2004). These developments are cognate with an intellectual climate that emphasizes indeterminacy (Cooper and Burrell, 1988), the roll-back of the state (Greenwood et al, 2002) and the idea that production is being organized ‘outside the bounds of
imperative coordination’ (Tsoukas, 2003). This overarching concern with organizational dispersal and decomposition can be counterposed with a growing body of work (particularly that carried out in public sector settings) suggesting that bureaucracy itself contains hitherto unrecognised and underrepresented capacities for flexibility and change. A particular strength of this work is that it highlights the ways in which ‘epochalist’ perspectives on contemporary restructuring have produced a highly restricted, caricatured and ahistorical view of bureaucracy and its role in advanced technological societies (Hill et al, 2000; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Alvesson and Thompson, 2005; Kallinikos, 2004, 2006; du Gay, 2000, 2005; Harris and Hopfl, 2006; Clegg, 2007; Harris 2008).

Whilst there is a long tradition of research on the information society broadly conceived, (Lyon, 1998; 1995), organizational analyses of how public sector bureaucracies might introduce ICTs in ways that support ‘information society’ objectives are comparatively rare – and it is with this in mind that the author has undertaken research on how the UK national library is using the internet and related technologies to develop new information infrastructures and services for a range of different library users (Harris, 2008). As noted above, the broad thrust of social scientific comment in recent years has been to equate web-based service delivery with the incipient demise of large institutions – but this work has revealed three aspects that suggest a more significant and enduring role for public institutions in the emergent ‘network society’. First, the exponential rise in the availability of information has been accompanied by a very wide debate on the control of digital rights (Lessig, 2002) - and control of these rights is being contested by the UK and other national libraries on the basis that they continue to defend the principle of ‘fair access’ to copyrighted material across a rapidly growing range of electronic formats. A second aspect is that there is no single organizational logic associated with the virtualised forms of service delivery now being offered by national libraries (Harris 2008). The digitisation of library provision takes many different forms, and is manifested by a diversity of new services and delivery modes. A third aspect, suggested by Harris (2008) (and investigated in some depth by the present paper) is that the institutional response to these technologies is being very substantially shaped by the expertise and professional identities of the senior library curators responsible for the digitization of national library resources.
The analysis that follows draws on the idea that the social shaping of new technologies occurs within a larger ‘institutional’ context [1]. Kallinikos (2006) has argued that understanding the institutional consequences of ICT’s presupposes an understanding of three aspects: firstly that these technologies are deployed in ways that reflect the ways in which organizational actors define and delimit particular social fields and domains of action; secondly that these fields are closely related to performance principles and control devices. A third feature is that the means by which patterns of formal organizing are stabilised in ways that serve to constitute the professional identities of the actors involved (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000). These features can be related to Bourdieu’s notion of a socially enacted habitus, defined as the means through which actors perceive the world through ‘a strategic system of dispositions and forms of know-how’ that function largely outside the ambit of rational calculus (Bourdieu, 1990; Crossley, 2003; McDonough, 2006) [2].

ICT and the public sphere: the digitization of the British Library

The British Library (or BL) operates as the national library of the United Kingdom and is the largest single provider serving the UK higher education sector [3]. The introduction of digital services since 2002 has involved the library in developing new business models for the digital environment, working across public sector and commercial boundaries (Harris, 2008). The annual report for 2005/06 features statistics on performance indicators (many of them laid down by the Department of Culture Media and Sport) for throughput and efficiency measured, for example, by the number of readers visiting reading rooms or the number of items supplied online (British Library, 2006). This is redolent of the ‘hard’ new public management policies described by commentators such as Ferlie and Geraghty (2005) [4]. Investment in new digital technologies is, however, also associated with those aspects of ‘the governance narrative’ that emphasise capacity-building moves to enhance the distinctive value of public services (Ferlie and Geraghty, 2005:432). Previous reports (available at www.bl.uk/news/report.html) have affirmed the principle of accountability to traditional users in higher education, whilst highlighting a range of new services offered to business users. The BL has, in addition, responded to government policies on social inclusion by extending its public sector remit to include ‘non-traditional’ users such as lifelong learners and schoolchildren.
As a library of ‘legal deposit’, the BL is responsible for the integrity of the UK national published archive, and has been the single most influential body in lobbying for the principle of legal deposit to be extended to electronic resources in the UK. The library is a recipient and a beneficiary of legal and voluntary deposits across a wide variety of published forms and it has a direct interest in copyright law as a publisher, a republisher, and a content aggregator. The principles of fair dealing and library privilege have long underpinned the public purposes of libraries and a major element of the BL advocacy role is centred on the need for these principles to be re-interpreted and sustained in the new context of digital service provision [5]. Senior BL personnel are engaged in a variety of high-level advocacy activities with the UK parliament and policy system and the library has lobbied the UK government on the need to balance the interests of digital rights holders and rights users. Table one indicates the broad scope of the digitization now underway, and identifies three main spheres of digitization (governance of digital rights, digital capacity for new information infrastructures, and information aggregation), relating these to a range of constituency building (or ‘stabilization’) objectives pursued by senior library-curators.

Table one: Institutions and the new interactive order: the case of the UK national library

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<tr>
<th>Spheres of library digitization</th>
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<td>Governance of digital rights</td>
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ICT and public access to library resources at the British Library – the case of Collect Britain

The BL is a recognised innovator in the use of digital media for the display of library collections [6]. The first attempt to provide online access to BL collections was closely bound up with the New Strategic Directions policy paper published by the library in 2001 as part of its response to government policies on developing an inclusive ‘learning society’ in the UK. In 1999 the UK National Lottery New Opportunities fund (NOF) launched a £50 million programme aimed at reducing social exclusion by encouraging the provision of new digital content and learning media. In 2001 the BL won NOF funding of £3.5 million to provide online access to its collections. This initiative, (later known as Collect Britain), was aimed at bringing web content of local and regional interest to lifelong learners, teachers and schoolchildren. One senior curator noted the project was designed around the need for a ‘regional appeal’ that would help overcome the perception of the BL as an ‘elitist metropolitan institution’. Collect Britain was also rooted in efforts to develop broader and more inclusive notions of UK citizenship than those traditionally espoused by national institutions – the content selected for the website included material from the home countries of UK citizens from South Asia and the Caribbean. Framed around a series of themed tours and virtual exhibitions, the project drew on the library’s extensive collections of historic maps, manuscripts, photographs, music scores, prints and drawings. At the time of its launch in 2001, Collect Britain was the most ambitious digitisation programme undertaken by the BL. Central to the project proposal was the intention to digitise a target of 100,000 artefacts between 2001 and 2004 with web resources to remain publicly accessible until 2007. The BL also collaborated with the UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) and the Public Records Office (PRO) on parallel project known as 21st Century Citizen, an online resource for 11 to 16 year old schoolchildren. The digital content provided by this initiative was incorporated into the national curriculum for UK schools in September 2002. [7].
Implementing Collect Britain

As noted, plans to develop public access to BL web resources were embedded in a commitment to socially inclusive ‘learning society’ policies. However, the curators responsible for initiating Collect Britain lacked firm guidelines on the educational needs of schoolchildren and they were even more uncertain about the educational or cultural orientations of the ‘lifelong learners’ identified by the Blair government as a key learning constituency from 1997 onwards. As the production of digitized objects continued throughout 2002 and 2003, the three senior curators who directed the project were faced with the question of how the newly digitised material was to be interpreted and presented in ways that would engage with the educational needs of its intended users. Interviews with the BL head of education service expressed one view of the initiative – whilst interviews with the senior curators expressed another. The head of education saw Collect Britain as an opportunity to experiment with different modes of engagement with teachers and schoolchildren, arguing that realising the full potential of digital media was likely to depend, not on the volume of material digitised or on the functionality of the website, but on the library’s ability to develop new forms of outreach and interpretative content [8]. Whilst the original project proposal centred on the idea that digital media would allow schoolchildren and lifelong learners to interact and engage with BL web resources, it later became clear that this would require considerable investment in both online learning expertise and in new pedagogies appropriate to the material presented, and this in turn implied a clear shift of emphasis away from the volume production of digital material towards a curatorial role that emphasised the interpretation of content. The senior curators responsible for the implementation of the project took the view that the BL is primarily a content provider/aggregator rather than an educational service provider, and they also took the view that the library’s commitment to HE and business users was such that efforts to embark on new educational programmes would be ‘inevitably under resourced’. Public funding on the scale provided by the original NOF grant was no longer available in 2004, by which time the curators close to the project began to consider the ways in which the Collect Britain content could be ‘repurposed’ and merged with other electronic resources (for example collection management systems).
Revisiting Collect Britain

The service agreement period of Collect Britain (whereby the BL undertook to provide online access to the resources described above) ended in early 2007. A second tranche of fieldwork carried out by the author in early summer 2008 suggests that the library’s expertise in the digitisation of its collection has been very substantially enhanced in the years since 2004, and it is apparent that the main focus of the digitisation programme had shifted away from the customised approach fostered by Collect Britain towards the mass digitization of archival and other library material. Whereas the earliest experiments in virtual objects were aimed at presenting and interpreting iconic items (such as the Lindisfarne Gospels) for the general public [3], archival resources such as the library’s collection of 19th century newspapers or ‘out of copyright’ 19th century novels are now been preserved in the form of millions of digitally archived pages. The BL is providing scholars with a portal and appropriate search tools – but the resources are being allowed to ‘speak for themselves’. The Collect Britain experience showed that the imposition of supporting material is both relatively costly – and (unlike the artifacts themselves) likely to ‘date’ quickly.

A major issue to emerge in recent years is that libraries face considerable difficulties in ensuring that electronic resources will be preserved as formats change in future (Harris, 2005; 2008). The BL has emerged as a leading centre for the new discipline of digital preservation in the years since 2003. Both the 19th century newspaper project and the out of copyright books project are being progressed by means a joint venture with the Microsoft Corporation. The BL is responsible for the selection and preparation of the individual objects whilst Microsoft funds the digitisation and web archiving procedures. BL collections are being digitised in order to preserve vulnerable items such as newspapers from physical deterioration – but Microsoft collaboration is also allowing the library to consolidate and aggregate valuable library assets, whilst taking advantage of a new electronic format offered by the corporation. In common with other capacity-building initiatives undertaken in recent years (see Harris 2008 for a review), the requisite technical processes are framed within a strategic partnership that allows the BL to leverage the value of its collections by means of new electronic formats. Previous research on BL Direct the library’s electronic document delivery service (Harris,
2008) shows that the BL role as a content aggregator is underpinned by both the scale of its journal collections by its ability to act as a broker of copyrighted material that meditates between the interests of digital rights holders and rights users.

Discussion
How should we interpret the above case findings and how do they help us to understand the institutional consequences of the new digital technologies? Our case study account of Collect Britain revealed a sharp divergence of opinion between the dominant curatorial reading of the project and a ‘dissident’ reading of digital learning technologies expressed by the BL head of education. A third view that emerged from the interviews with technical personnel carried out in both 2004 and 2008 was that the project could be understood as a prototype that had provided valuable insights into the technical characteristics of web-based public interfaces (e.g. the development of metadata and digital object management techniques). These aspects are cognate with a large body of literature that shows how technologies are enacted and shaped in accordance with different viewpoints, organizational interests and interpretations. The implementation of the Collect Britain project also corroborates the idea that there may be a substantial divergence (or ‘drift’ according to Ciborra, 2002) between the policy espousals endorsed by project proposals and the subsequent management of these projects. This is consistent with the idea that large scale techno-organizational change depends on the ability to manage both heterogeneous expertise (Star and Ruhleder, 1996) and/or complementary intellectual assets (Quinn, 1992).

The interviews revealed a general agreement that Collect Britain had failed to meet the objectives of the original project brief. The progress of the initiative down to 2007 cannot, however be understood in terms of a conventional implementation ‘failure’. The digitisation underway since 2001 is extremely broad in scope and three main features suggest a more nuanced reading of the project. The first of these relates to the issue of resource constraints. The senior curators interviewed recognised that the library could not respond to the Blair government’s agenda on lifelong learning whilst expanding the library’s provision for both traditional academic users and business users. A second
factor is that the mass digitization of archived material is cognate with the BL’s new role as an information aggregator and a broker of digital content [9].

Whilst the micropolitics of implementing *Collect Britain* are inherently open ended and rooted in the *petits recits* of a single technology project, the initiative was embedded in what may be termed a public sector *habitus* (McDonough, 2006) and it can be argued that that senior library curators were enacting this habitus as they struggled to define an institutional field that was emerging from the new disciplines of web archiving, digital preservation and digital object management. The strategic dispositions of this small, but highly influential group of administrative professionals were very substantially rooted in an ethos that prioritised the principles of legal deposit, ‘fair access’ to information and copyright exception. The new institutional field is informed by the ability of curators to define and delimit the operating norms of the digital library in contradistinction to those of other professions, most notably the international publishers who control the rights to a growing range of electronic formats (Abbott, 1988). The broader process of digitisation is being shaped by a range of advocacy, networking and constituency building activities (see table 1, page 5) that serve to stabilise particular patterns of formal organizing within this emergent institutional field. It would also appear that the *habitus* of senior library curators is not on only constituted by, but also serves to constitute the professional identity of this group (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000).

**Conclusion**

The historically unparalleled volume of information now available to scholars is leading the world’s libraries to rethink their objectives in relation to the new horizon of interactivity opened up by the internet and related technologies (Anttiroiko and Savolainen, 2007). Whilst the discourses of globalisation and postmodernisation have resonated strongly with the ubiquity of information networks, ‘dematerialised’ forms of production and virtual service delivery, these commentaries are typically long on speculation and short on the analysis of specific organizational choices. It is with these issues in mind that the paper has reviewed both the broader institutional consequences of digitization at the BL and the micropolitics of *Collect Britain*. Our longitudinal account of the project
confirms the heterogeneity of large projects and their inherently indeterminate resistance to imperative coordination (Ciborra, 2002, Tsoukas, 2003). Previous work carried out at the BL shows that elements of indeterminacy and contestation are present at the institutional level, where the new public management has generated simultaneous, (and largely contradictory) pressures for marketization and tight control of library operations (Harris 2008). Yet the social and cultural mission of the British Library – to provide scholarly access to information resources- remains very substantially intact. As in other spheres of virtual service delivery, it is apparent that the master theme of decomposition is being counterbalanced by new forms of organizational recomposition (Clegg, 2007). The evidence considered by this paper suggests that the professional identities and ethical predispositions of senior curators are playing a key part in sustaining the cultural mission of the library and its role shaping the basic contours of the UK ‘information society’.
Footnotes

[1] Whilst the ‘new institutionalism’ has become associated with the idea that institutions generate ‘convergent’ patterns of change, current interest in institutions is by no means restricted to this view. Recent work has emphasised the significant role of sectoral and institutional fields, whilst arguing that the organizational outcomes associated with a given technology are unlikely to be homogenous (Barrett et al, 2006:10).

[2] Bourdieu’s theory of social practice coheres around the three categories of habitus, field and capital, each of which is defined in particular relation to the question of agency and social structure. Society is constituted by delimited but interlocking fields, whilst social action is also shaped by the resources or cultural capital available to agents in a given institutional context or field of play (Bourdieu, 1990).

[3] More than 50 per cent of BL activity is aimed at supporting HE, and a further 25 per cent is directed towards support for industry and business. The extensive programme of digitisation, underway since 2001, features heavily in curatorial efforts to maintain the BL’s position as the largest provider within the network of UK research libraries.

[4] The policy directives issued by the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) have encouraged BL and other UK cultural bureaucracies to adopt more efficient and customer-focused forms of management. As in other public sector settings, the strategic change narratives of the new public management have placed a heavy emphasis on contracts, consumers, and markets. Previous work on the BL (Harris, 2005, 2008) suggests that the new public management underestimates the key part being played by professional identities, expertise and continuities in public sector accountability (see Harris (2008) and Clegg et al (forthcoming) for extended reviews).

[5] The DCMS set up the Legal deposit advisory committee in September 2005 to devise the regulations that will give practical expression to the Legal deposit Libraries act of 2003. Senior BL executives (notably the current and former directors of Scholarship and Collections) have played a key role in the work of this committee. A parallel pilot project on legal deposit of e-journals was set up with 23 publishers, under the auspices of the UK joint committee for Legal Deposit. The BL submitted evidence to the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport inquiry into Digital Rights Management (DRM) in 2006 and to the Gowers Review of Intellectual property in 2007.

[6] The BL launched Turning the Pages, a project that created virtual objects from some of the library’s greatest treasures including the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Diamond Sutra and a Leonardo notebook.

[7] The Twenty-first Century Citizen initiative offers a contrasting example of digitisation. Although much less ambitious in terms of volume of images digitised, this initiative provides web content and activities that support enquiry-based learning. The development of this learning tool for the UK schools curriculum drew on the combined expertise of three established content providers. The design contract was awarded to Worth media and interactive media agency specialising in education and healthcare applications. The web resources available include text, images, manuscripts, mapping statistics and sound recordings from three institutional partners. A variety of support materials and activities encourage an enquiry based approach to learning about contemporary social, political and cultural issues.
[8] This included the recruitment of specially appointed creative research fellows (funded by Pearson education) and close engagement between the BL education service and teachers on the creation of interpretative content and courseware. This approach was in accord with plans for the BL to become a supporting partner to the UK Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in specific areas of innovative pedagogy. Plans to extend Collect Britain beyond the terms of the original NOF project anticipated the creation of a digital environment that would allow individuals to make formal or informal ‘learning journeys’ through BL web content.

[9] The BL is one of the world’s largest repositories of intellectual property and has long been recognised as a leading supplier of documents to academic and business users in the UK and abroad. Recent years have seen the library become a content aggregator in partnership with a range of public and private sector organizations. In January 2007 the BL signed an agreement with the US department of Energy to collaborate on the development of a global science gateway (known as science.world), designed to make science information resources available via a single internet portal. Staff at the BL Information Systems division are now developing capacity for the automatic intake of e-journals and e-material received under the voluntary deposit scheme (Known as Ingest). Search results on Google Scholar now include links to the BL electronic document delivery service – the latter having been relaunched as British Library Direct in 2006.
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