

The British Library - A Library for the 21st Century

For over 40 years, the British Library has been the world's leading document supplier, serving over 20,000 customers from all over the World, including some of the world's largest libraries. As guardian of the world's largest and most diverse collection of research materials (currently totalling over 150 million items), we are very well positioned to deliver both popular and harder-to-find materials, but our overriding challenge, a challenge that is shared with almost every library in the World, is how we stay relevant in an age where technological developments have redefined the way research information is created, distributed and accessed.

Staying relevant to the 'Google Generation'

The British Library is one of the world's great libraries and plays a pivotal role in supporting research in the United Kingdom and around the World. Our mission is to support research at all levels and, in order to achieve that, we have needed to embrace these changes and this has resulted in a period of rapid change at the British Library. A recent study, commissioned by the British Library and JISC, that studied the Information Behaviours of the Researcher of the Future* found that 89% of college students began their research at a search engine, principally Google, and they described their overall search engine experience as "almost perfect". The reason behind this description was that search engines fit their lifestyles better than physical libraries. Search engines have raised expectations of library services globally with instant gratification demanded, 24/7 access expected and answers 'at a click', regardless of format, as standard.

Search engines have had an immense impact on the future strategy of the British Library, but it is not the only development and two further web developments have had an equal impact on the way in which the British Library operates as a supplier of research materials and these are the proliferation of broadband and web 2.0 technologies.

The Internet is not what it used to be.

Until just a few years ago our web experience was quite a passive one, whereby we would interact with documents and web pages. The widespread adoption of broadband has changed this experience and we are now demanding access to richer content, such as sound and video. Furthermore, with services such as Facebook and Youtube driving the web 2.0 revolution, the way in which content is created has changed exponentially, with the majority of content added to the web today generated by the end user. Both of these developments raise challenges for the British Library and other libraries around the World in meeting the demands of our users. How do we remain relevant in an environment where non-traditional formats are in demand and research is being disseminated through non-traditional channels and rapidly appears (and disappears) through blogs, wikis and social networking sites?

Defining a Library for the 21st Century

It is true that libraries are facing greater challenges than ever before and these challenges are particularly apparent for national libraries, such as the British Library. So, how are we responding to these challenges? Well, the only way for us to remain relevant in this disruptive digital age is to embrace change wholeheartedly and continually strive to understand, and respond to, the needs of our users. For example, the British Library has recently partnered with Google Scholar to offer our customers the opportunity to order full text through the British Library document supply service directly from the Google Scholar search result.

We are also partnering extensively to bring large sections of our collection, that are frequently unavailable anywhere else on the Internet, to the web for the first time. Recent projects have focussed on the rich media formats that are so in demand from Internet users today and include Archival Sound Online, a portal that contains educational sound recordings, including speeches by some of the most significant people of our time, such as Ghandi and Florence Nightingale. In 2007 we also launched a website that studied the development of regional dialect in the UK and included sound recordings and other materials to build understanding and 19th Century Newspapers, a collaboration with Cengage Learning, has made historical content from some of the most significant local, regional and national newspapers in the United Kingdom available for the first time on the web.

These are just a few examples of how the British Library is partnering to make unique parts of our collection more accessible to users all over the World and there are many more examples you can find out about at our website at www.bl.uk. These examples are also representative of how the British Library will develop in future years. With so much content available at the fingertips of Internet users today, and that content continuing to grow quickly with projects such as the mass digitisation projects underway by organisations like Google and Microsoft, the British Library is playing a significant role in that process. We are guardian of a collection that is without equal in terms of size and diversity, and our goal is to make materials that have never been available before, available to whoever needs to access it. Now that's a 21st Century Library.

Barry Smith is Senior Marketing Manager of British Library and is responsible for the marketing of all British Library document supply services worldwide.

Information Behaviour of the researcher of the Future was commissioned by The British Library and JISC and was created in association with CIBER. It can be accessed from the British Library website at <http://www.bl.uk/news/2008/pressrelease20080116.html>