Filling in a digital black hole

by Dame Lynne Brindley, Chief Executive of the British Library

Research shows that nationally we all suffer from what I call ‘Personal Digital Disorder’. Few people have their thousands of digital photographs stored so that their grandchildren will be able to look at them. It’s my job to ensure that this does not extend to our national memory.

At the exact moment that President Barack Obama was inaugurated, all traces of President Bush vanished from the White House website, to be replaced by images of and speeches by his successor. Attached to the website had been a booklet entitled 100 things Americans may not know about the Bush Administration – they may never know them now. When the website changed the link was broken and the booklet became unavailable.

The 2000 Sydney Olympics was the first truly online Games with over 150 websites – but these sites disappeared overnight at the end of the Games and the only record is held by the National Library of Australia.

These are just two high profile examples of a huge challenge that faces Digital Britain. There are approximately eight million .uk domain websites currently, and that number grows at a rate of 15–20% annually. The scale is enormous, and the value of these websites for future research and innovation vast. But online content is notoriously ephemeral. And if websites continue to disappear in the same way as those on President Bush and the Sydney Olympics – perhaps exacerbated by the current economic climate – the memory of the nation disappears too. Future researchers and citizens will find a black hole in the knowledge base of the 21st Century.

People often assume that commercial organisations such as Google are collecting and archiving this kind of material – in fact they are not. The task of capturing our online intellectual heritage and preserving it for the long term falls, quite rightly, to the same libraries and archives that have over centuries systematically collected books, periodicals, newspapers and recordings – and which remain available in perpetuity, thanks to these institutions.

Olympics fans will be pleased to know that the British Library is undertaking a collecting and archiving project for the London 2012 Games. With appropriate regulation, we aim to create a comprehensive archive of material from the UK web domain. We are also working hard with publishers, government and the other UK legal deposit libraries to make a reality of the national archive of electronic publications envisaged by the 2003 Legal Deposit Libraries Act. This extends our statutory responsibilities to collect UK printed publications to include UK digital outputs such as websites, e-journals and e-documents. We are working with international partners to tackle the difficulties of preserving this content and providing long term storage and access for researchers in 10, 50 and 100 years. This is truly a public service, ensuring an independent and trusted bedrock for education, research and commercial innovation within a public institution with long term perspective and mission.
I am fortunate to spend my working day in one of the world’s greatest libraries, a unique storehouse of 150 million items from ancient oracle bones to this morning’s newspaper. Our treasures range from Magna Carta to the lyrics of the Beatles. Digital Britain must include digitising this goldmine of content. Access to a digitised British Library ought to be the right of every citizen, every household, every child, every school and public library, universities and business. That’s a vision worth delivering on.

We’ve made a start. One of the jewels of our collection are our 17th and 18th century newspapers. This magnificent archive provides a vivid and direct insight into two centuries of British history – including the reporting of the French Revolution, the great financial scandal of the 1720s, the South Sea Bubble, and the inauguration of George Washington.

Because of their great fragility, access to such newspapers is severely restricted, but earlier this month, a digitised and fully searchable version of the collection became available, for free, to UK Higher and Further Education institutions.

I welcome the Government’s strong vision of a Digital Britain and keenly anticipate tomorrow’s interim report from Lord Carter. It adds up to an agenda of fundamental importance for the UK’s cultural, creative and economic future in the global digital environment of the 21st Century. But the vision of a ‘Digital Britain’ must include the critical public service of preserving Digital Britain’s collective memory and digitising the unrivalled content within the British Library.

Anyone who watches television, films or reads novels can see how the UK is now reaping the benefit of systematic public investment in its rich heritage over centuries. David Starkey couldn’t have made his forthcoming TV series on Henry VIII without the British Library’s collections. Anthony Horowitz used the Library for research when writing the popular television series Foyle’s War and the actor Alun Armstrong researched for the part of Albert Einstein by listening to the only sound recording of him at the British Library. Creativity does not simply emerge from nowhere.

In the British Library the UK has an institution capable of leadership and a track record of delivery to ensure that our digital future can be a rich goldmine and not a black hole. For my part I commit to championing this effort on your behalf to the very best of my ability.

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