

Investing in Knowledge

Museums, Libraries and Archives in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper considers the emerging role of museums, libraries and archives as agents for social change and development in the 21st century knowledge society. It takes as an example the work of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council to show how it is possible to develop new service offers that will attract new audiences and retain existing audiences, so that all may benefit from the collections of England's museums, libraries and archives. Particular attention is paid to the exciting opportunities offered by the new information society technologies creating virtual collections tailored to the individual user.

Towards the Knowledge Society

Much has been written about the journey towards the knowledge society; how life will be different and what will be the drivers of society when easy access to information and knowledge is at the very heart of the lives of every citizen. Countries around the world are striving to lead the knowledge economy 'race', creating industries and infrastructure that manage, synthesise and add value to knowledge on a world stage. International organisations such as the European Union and UNESCO are making major investment to develop new opportunities for people to benefit from networked services and to build exemplar models of what a mature knowledge society might look like.

Defining exactly what a knowledge society is or, indeed, when a country has achieved the goal of mature knowledge society remains both a matter of political aspiration and academic discussion. I wish to avoid extensive exploration of such issues within this paper since my purpose is not to present an objective statement about the nature and value of the knowledge society. Rather, I wish to explore some of the emerging trends within one part of the knowledge economy demonstrating the social and economic value of museums, libraries and archives as key drivers to widen access to rich seams of information and knowledge, for learning, for

community development, for creativity, for the economy and enterprise, for understanding and to enable people to live fuller lives.

It is these benefits that perhaps define most effectively what should be our aspirations for the knowledge society. Those who already make their living by exploiting information and knowledge for others (such as librarians, information scientists, curators, archivists and teachers) are aware of the value of knowledge as the driver of learning and increasing understanding of the world around us. Sadly, most of the rest of society remains in ignorance of the difference that good information and knowledge can make to decision making, understanding new aspects of life, gaining new skills and being creative. This hints at important roles for all knowledge workers, as agents for social development and skills sharing.

If there are common themes in the various models of knowledge societies that abound, they are certainly the networking of resources so that they are easily accessible from a distance (for example across the Internet); that there is a body of knowledge (or content) this is available and that there are mechanisms for delivering the knowledge to people with all types of need, ability, interest and skills. These components call for as much understanding about the needs of the user as they do the value of the content. So, content management, audience studies and service development are core common themes. For reasons that we will see later I would call these components – collections, connections and customers.

Knowledge Society Policies in the United Kingdom

The widening of access to the emerging global phenomenon of the Internet and the potential it offers had, like many other countries, progressed from early beginnings in the 1980s. By the start of the 1990s the Joint Academic Network (JANET) was a significant driver of knowledge services across the university sector and various experiments within the public sector were taking place to explore how far wider access to networked information and skills enrichment could be provided from locations such as public libraries. Two examples of these programmes, both funded by the then British Library Research and Development Department, were the Croydon Libraries Internet Project¹ (CLIP) and IT Point in Solihull²; one of the first ever ICT learning centres in a public library.

What is certain is that by the time that the Blair Government was elected in 1997 the expertise and planning was in place for them to make early commitments to the development of information and communications technologies as the mechanism for the creation of a world-beating knowledge society.

¹ <http://www.cordis.lu/libraries/en/plis/croydon.html>

² <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/papers/ukoln/ormes-1997-02/>

"Information is the key to the modern age. The new information age offers possibilities for the future limited only by the boundaries of our imaginations. The potential for new electronic networks is breathtaking – with prospects for change as widespread and fundamental as the agricultural and industrial revolutions of earlier eras.

I want to ensure that everyone in the United Kingdom has the best chance to seize this moment – an information age which offers new opportunities for greater prosperity, and a better quality of life."

Prime Minister Blair in "Our Information Age" (1997)

National organisations were invited to make proposals for projects to support this new policy direction and significant investment (in excess of £1bn) was made to support the roll out of broadband, increasing access to technology and technology training and new digital content for education. Projects included the creation of the 'University for Industry' (an online university), investment to deliver ICT hardware and skills into the homes of some of the poorest people in the country, the creation of community learning centres where ICT and especially the Internet could be used to develop new community skills and understanding.

The first major project for my own organisation, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, after its formation in 2000 was to lead the government's People's Network programme to install ICT learning centres in all 4,300 public libraries; a programme involving the installation of over 30,000 terminals with broadband in all but 8% of the libraries, and all achieved within two years and actually below the budget of £100m. Recent independent studies have shown how significant has been the People's Network as a means of attracting new users to ICT and networked resources, building the foundation of the knowledge society³.

Alongside the People's Network, MLA was asked by the government to develop a £50m programme of digitisation to create online resources for lifelong learning using the collections of museums, libraries and archives. EnrichUK⁴ is now a portal providing access to 150 diverse digital services ranging from virtual museums, to digital archives of newsreel movies, from complete archives of church plans to online tools to select modern fiction by mood and content rather than casual browsing. The 'EnrichUK programme' has been recognised as a landmark project for several reasons. First of all it showed clearly the emerging value of digitisation (content as the raw material of networked services), second, it provided the proof of the ability to train many people, working in over 300 organisations, to work together to create digital resources on an industrial scale; third, the critical mass of work associated with the project laid the foundations for government-wide standards for digitisation and metadata; and finally, EnrichUK highlighted the importance of exploiting fully for everyone the knowledge collections in museums, libraries and archives.

³ <http://www.mla.gov.uk/action/pn/impact.asp>

⁴ www.enrichuk.net

The UK government was and continues to be of the view that universal access to ICT and network resources is essential for the creation of a modern society and late in 2004 produce a review of the roll out of broadband nationally (Enabling a Digitally United Kingdom⁵) giving new impetus to the drive for universal access as a driver to build the demand and therefore the market for a mature knowledge society.

Alongside this commitment to access, the Department for Education and Skills has recently produced a five-year strategy for developing e-learning⁶ which is designed to produce personal learning environments where the individual can develop using the resources they find most useful in the ways that best fit their own learning style. This personalisation of access to networked services represents a major trend for the future of networked knowledge. It is seen not just in this new e-learning strategy, but in a range of new developments in the non-public sphere of the Internet (for example, online shopping accounts) and most significant for the development of the knowledge society, the convergence of services between different organisations, where the focus is on access to knowledge resources across the whole of the public sector rather than defining the content available by knowledge of the owning institution.

I will return to these matters when considering likely development in the short to medium term.

The Role of Museums, Libraries and Archives within the Knowledge Society

Museums, libraries and archives have many things in common, from their public value to their accessibility to all. However, within the context of the knowledge society there are three components and processes that they have which are of direct and compelling significance to the policy makers of any country that is interested in building a knowledge society.

The most obvious of these components is collections (or content as I called it in the first section of this paper). Museums, libraries and archives collect things; they are the storehouses of our cultures, our experiences, our histories; they are our knowledge memory banks, stored and managed for the benefit of everyone. But to be of value they must be more than this. They must develop mechanisms to connect the collections to people to transfer value to them – for learning, for enterprise, for creative endeavour or just for fun! To do this all museums, libraries and archives provide access and services (the means of connecting people) and if they have a commitment to widening access as far as is possible, they will also study carefully the range of potential users and how they may develop their services to meet the

⁵ www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/publications/reports/digital/digitalframe.pdf

⁶ <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/e-strategy/>

different needs. Museums, libraries and archives therefore join in the three components of **collections, delivery mechanisms and audiences**.

So while the role of these institutions in storing collections is critical as the engine of content for new networked services, what makes them genuinely some of the first knowledge institutions is the fact they work hard to go beyond storage alone to make connections between knowledge and people. As knowledge institutions they offer people the raw material of the future.

The Museums Libraries and Archives Council as Strategic Leader for Knowledge Institutions

MLA is the government's lead strategic body for museums, libraries and archives. It receives an annual grant of £50m from the Department of Culture and employs over 200 staff in London and the nine English regions. It has an extensive portfolio of strategic responsibilities for the development of knowledge institutions from setting standards for modernisation and continuous improvement, providing advice on the development of collections, co-ordinating a major workforce development programme bringing together all the partners within the sector to work together and very large transformational programmes for regional museums and for the public library service.

However, while all of the programmes focus on the goal of a knowledge society for all, the integration of the shared future of museums, libraries and archives as knowledge institutions is no more clearly visible than in the creation of digital resources and services. In Cyberspace the collections of knowledge institutions may be of equal relevance to the searcher. Indeed, the combining of collections and objects in new ways presents perhaps the most significant change yet seen in our approach to service provision. We are already requiring institutions with programmes of digitisation to guarantee to provide access to the objects and collections through relevant online services far beyond their own website.

A critical responsibility for the future is to enable those who care for collections to exploit fully the new, networked technologies, giving maximum access to knowledge to every citizen. We believe that museums, libraries and archives contribute to a successful and creative nation by connecting people to knowledge and that the interoperability allowing digital objects to be in many places at the same time and the use of rich metadata will allow access opportunities that have been unimaginable until now. There will always remain much more to the collections of museums, libraries and archives than digital representation, but we fail at our peril if we do not recognise just how important good quality knowledge resources are to the development of networked services and the significant contribution that museums, libraries and archive can make.

An example. MLA has formed a collaboration called the Common Information Environment Group (CIE Group) with a number of other major suppliers of public sector digital content, including the British Library, UK universities, the National Health Service, the National Archives the BBC and the Department for Education and Skills. The CIE group recently undertook a public opinion survey. The results⁷ show that of all suppliers of digital content, museums, libraries and archives rank top as the most trusted sources of knowledge. Almost 90% of respondents, Internet users and non-users alike said that they would fully trust web-based information if supplied by museums, libraries and archives. This is an important finding. It demonstrates very clearly that to incubate and encourage the full benefits of networked services, the role of knowledge institutions as content providers will be pivotal. But a word of caution. You will recall that I have referred several times to the need to connect content effectively to the user, whether on the web or in a museum, library or archive. Without this effective connectivity linking collections, delivery mechanisms and audiences the creation of integrated digital content will not alone create the knowledge society.

Let me be more specific. In the United Kingdom the government through education and culture has invested at least £2bn in the development of digital resources, to support formal education at all levels and lifelong learning. I have already described how MLA has managed projects in excess of £50m and has created more than 150 innovative websites using the resources of museums, libraries and archives. Other funders have supported the development of similarly large numbers of websites. If you know where to find the information, the address of the parent portal or the name of the website, the resources will be easily discovered. However, the reality is that the person who is searching for information on a topic about which they know very little stands only minimal chance of finding our resources. All our experience demonstrates that cultural institutions do not rank high in public search engines unless specifically described in the search.

So, however much we spend on digitisation, unless we find mechanisms for improving accessibility to the digital cultural heritage that has been created for all to use, the majority of people will never find it. That is a concern we must share if we are to achieve maximum use of our collections. In documenting the digital collections of our countries we are beginning to organise the cultural heritage knowledge in ways that will transform discovery. It is a first and important step providing much-needed signposting to what is available and how it may be located.

But that is not all. If we, as leaders of knowledge institutions, as explorers of the digital landscape, are to overcome the current shortcomings of discovery, we must address not just the mapping and description of collections, but consider much more carefully the needs and behaviours of users of all types. The Internet is a personal

⁷ www.common-infomation.org

tool for personal needs and we must move from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to design, to place the individual at the heart of the digital knowledge space.

There is already apparent a shift in design emphasis in the public and private spheres towards the creation of knowledge spaces that support the individual; containing a profile of interests and most often details of the credit card! Many of you will have used online shopping services such as Amazon where the profile is linked to 'one click' purchase for convenience. Simple and very effective in capturing sales. The same pattern is now widely used in a number of similar online services and it is evident that they are becoming increasingly popular with the purposive user. It is the beginning of a trend that I believe will transform our expectations of networked services over the next three to five years. The Internet as a practical tool for living rather than a playground.

Within the public realm the emergence of e-learning and virtual learning environments reflect this shift and underline my argument that for universal and sustainable networked services, the user is as important as the content. Our Department for Education and Skills strategy for of e-learning across the whole of the learning spectrum has made very clear it expects providers to develop content that may be matched to individual need. The challenges that this strategy presents to us are set to transform public realm services in the same way that personalised online shopping is creating new business models for the commercial sector.

Recognising this trend, MLA is already developing the concept of the personal knowledge space (we are calling it 'MYBERSPACE') as part of a programme we call The Knowledge Web. Our plan is to agree with public sector content providers, whether museums, libraries or archives, that they make available to everyone their content and object level and ensure that it conforms to our national standards for metadata description and file formats. This then presents us with a distributed repository of knowledge resources that can delivered through filtering services to any user who has configured the Myberspace element of the Knowledge Web. They might define age, location, interests, learning styles, just as one would in an e-learning environment. Once their question is stated, the topic and their profile would be matched against the repository of knowledge resources.

We are only just beginning to test how to develop this on a large scale. However, I can paint a picture in words of the difference between current search mechanisms and what the Knowledge Web will do. I made the point earlier that public search engines become extremely unreliable when searches are ill-defined. And remember that the vast majority of searches are entered in no more than 1.5 words; and that the searcher will have little idea of institutions to look for. Today, to be successful the searcher needs to know a great deal about what they don't know.

Imagine someone who has by chance heard about an archaeological site in their neighbourhood where some Roman remains have been found. Never before have they thought about the buried past. They go to Google and type ROMAN REMAINS.

They get 1.2m hits and on the first two pages there is nothing that meets their very casual need to find out more; a need that could if nourished turn into a learning journey. Our plans for the Knowledge Web will reduce any search results to no more than six items and all will be relevant to the specific user. The MYBERSPACE interface knows that the searcher has never before looked for information on ROMAN REMAINS, prefers to use material that is audio and/or visual if possible and MYBERSPACE also knows their geospatial location.

The Knowledge Web searches the knowledge repository and filters suitable resources. Our searcher therefore will get hits such as:

- A streamed audio lecture on archaeology
- A clip from a popular TV series about Roman Britain
- Details of all the books on Roman Britain actually on the shelves of their local library, with the ability to click the link to reserve them
- All the museum collections of Roman remains within 45 minutes travelling time with sample images and public transportation information
- Details of active archaeology groups with the local area.

This is simple and direct information using the power of networking to harvest from a large range of knowledge resources and the benefits of personalisation to match the resources to the particular need. This is the route to an informed and learning society where searching success is not measured by technological competency of the user, but the ability of designers to make the whole process invisible to the end user.

We are all on a voyage of discovery and the work I have described is an essential component of enabling others to travel confidently in our tracks in the future. This is the century of knowledge and it is up to us as the guardians and exploiters of the assets of knowledge institutions to make their collections available to everyone.

That is a noble ambition to achieve.