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SCHOLARSHIP

SARA DE FREITAS

## TOWARDS THE GLOBAL LIBRARY: A NEW CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE BRITISH LIBRARY

SUSSEX UNIVERSITY, GRADUATE SCHOOL OF CULTURE AND COMMUNITY, 2001.

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In 1972 the passing of the British Library Act formally brought to an end an institutional relationship between the British Museum and the British Museum Library which had lasted for over two hundred years. Since its creation in 1753, the Library had, in its capacity as the national deposit, developed a range of services and an infrastructure, which centred on the acquisition, storage, and preservation of material for the national collection. However, in addition to meeting its legislative responsibilities, the Library had, from the very beginning, made itself increasingly responsible for the organisation and provision of the national collection for a growing academic usership. This desire, to fulfil both the function of a secure repository and of an educational resource, has throughout its history, provided the Library with the majority of the practical challenges that it faced in its day-to-day operations.

The reformation of the national library as an autonomous institution in 1972 however signalled a period of significant change for the now renamed British Library<sup>1</sup>. From that period to the present, first through its relocation and the consequent reviews of strategy and internal policy and latterly through the uptake of ICTs, the Library witnessed a radical reorganisation of its services and infrastructure. The changes noted in this study therefore, chart not only the transition from analogue to digital library services, but also the increasing relevance of the central discourses of librarianship – the acquisition, provision, storage, classification and preservation of information – to information science as a whole. Moreover, this study set out to identify the emergent strategies that the community of national libraries was developing during this period in pursuit of global systems for information provision and library services.

The study explores these changes in the Library in relation to the cultural discourses and specificity of Michel Foucault, taking up his analysis of Bentham's Panopticon and applying it to the round reading room of the British (Museum) Library at Bloomsbury, London; the new Humanities reading rooms of the British Library at St. Pancras, King's Cross, London; and the web site of the British Library; whilst incorporating into the analysis elements of policy, politics, and history, as well as an exploration of the plans and architecture of the Library, its services and infrastructure, in a fully cultural study of the Library – the first of its kind to absorb a range of interdisciplinary materials (interviews, plans, policy, surveys, consultation documentation, with existent histories). Altogether, this study provides conclusive evidence that one of Britain's oldest and largest information providers has indeed undergone a period of self-reflection and change in order to incorporate the political, economic, and philosophical (epistemological) transitions implied by the introduction of ICTs with its incumbent culture. Following from a Foucauldian line then, the thesis explores the epistemology of the Library through

selection criteria that includes information provision and access as central factors in the transformation of the Library.

To approach the issue of a growing usership and to achieve its extended mission to provide services to the public (at home and abroad), the British Library has pursued a policy of partnerships. In particular, the digital library program has provided an example of how partnerships with institutions and commercial companies whether they are local, national, international, or global can achieve increased markets for information provision across networks using specially designed protocols. An example of this is the Library web site itself (see: <http://www.bl.uk>), which aims to provide better, and more integrated, services for information provision by using: online public access catalogues,<sup>2</sup> ordering systems, delivery services, and links to other information providers, thereby facilitating a step towards the realisation of the global library.

A greater accessibility to information and an increased global usership have necessitated a rapid assimilation of ICTs into the Library's strategic planning and the result has been a far more versatile approach to the organisation and provision of information. Furthermore, many of the traditional problems associated with librarianship and data storage limits are overcome, or at least reduced, by the introduction of digital information and new formats for storage and access.<sup>3</sup> Taken together these benefits have coincided with the commercial growth of the British Library - it is notable that the national library is one of the few British institutions that regularly makes money from its services, providing a quarter of its annual gross expenditure (sales and donations).<sup>4</sup> However, this study concludes the need for continued investment in the Library's digital policy, strategy and infrastructure if it is to expand its commercial operations<sup>5</sup>.

The success of the Library to date will potentially ignite the momentum for the next phases of the extension of the Library in order to provide for a specialised digital storage facility with state of the art technology for storage and preservation of digital materials. This will service the anticipated growth in digital publishing in addition to providing additional spaces for the new users. The incoming Chief Executive, Dianne Brindley has highlighted the importance of achieving these objectives for the future as an integral part of expanding the Library beyond its walls and offering the user the opportunity to explore the global library of digital information via the Internet.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes:

1 The appearance of 'Library' in this abstract refers to the 'British Library'.

2 The first Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) in Britain, BLAISE-LINE started in the British Library in 1977. See L. Carpenter, S. Shaw, and A. Prescott (eds), 1998. *Towards the Digital Library: The British Library's Initiatives for Access Programme*, London: The British Library.

3 The introduction of new formats, i.e.: CD-ROM's, DVD's, Hard disk storage media.

4 See *The British Library's 26th Annual Report, 1998-1999*. "Review of Strategic Developments" by Chief Executive Brian Lang.

5 See *The British Library's 27th Annual Report, 1999-2000*. This report marks a slight decrease in the revenue generated by the Library.

6 See also: the expanded mission of the Library to engage with other partners to provide for a broader provision of educational aims. See virtual universities and online lectures, for example: Fathom: a collaborative group including the British Library, the New York Library, Colombia University, Cambridge University Press and the Smithsonian Natural History Museum amongst others. See: <http://www.fathom.com>.