

Introduction to the day

10 years ago, the new Labour Govt had plenty of strategies for digitising public services -

- the University for Industry;
- a bold ambition to make libraries community focal points for access to learning and information;
- a commitment to 'e-government'.

The idea of "digitising" existing services was understood, but the concept of "digital" being something altogether different was much less clear.

It was very much "us" to "them" services. No-one had quite got to terms with the idea of the "return path" – but in the last week or two the No 10 Downing Street website has demonstrated the power of the return path!

As we think about strategies today it's worth remembering how completely out of date the strategies of ten years ago have become. Nobody foresaw the likes of....

- Wikipedia – 6th or 7th biggest site in the world - with only 1 employee
- My Space with over 100 million accounts and not an IPR lawyer in sight
- Weblogs in the tens of millions and doubling in number every half-year
- You Tube changing hands for \$1.6 bn...and what is it, anyway?

So here are six challenges for the day as we think about a national strategy for the digital world

Interactivity

"Democratisation of the media" may not sit very comfortably with established notions of expertise and scholarship.

It's hard to be open to the idea that "knowledge comes from many different places" and it raises some real issues. It may feel as if it's a re-run of the 'access' and 'excellence' debate which caused some people so much angst when Chris Smith was Secretary of State at DCMS.

And for institutions with a long-established commitment to serious scholarship, it begs questions about how to respond to the hunger for interactive engagement by users.

Last summer Ofcom had a series of seminars about their proposed 'PSP' – the Public Service Publisher' which they see as being very substantially driven by user-generated content, but also in the tradition of public service broadcasting. I asked how they propose to manage questions of standards

and quality. Others attacked that as a complete irrelevance – imposing old grammar on a new language. I don't think it is irrelevant. It's a real question.

And it's one for the proposed European Digital Library, which cannot be simply a one-way resource made available to a grateful citizenry by the munificence of Member States' finance ministers – if it is, it will have failed before it starts. It will have to be a network, living in a Web 2.0 world – the word “library” is a completely inappropriate analogy.

That doesn't mean it will be shapeless – it will need maps and navigation aids as well as protocols and access agreements.

A final thought – Charlie Chaplin said “Genius is editing” - in this context it must be about striving to combine the minimum necessary framework for coherence with the maximum amount of scope for users

Branding

Whatever 'branding' means in the digital world, you know it's going to be painful for institutions with 100 years of history.

Brands are signifiers:- so the Natural History Museum is a powerful brand but for a kid online “Dinosaurs” is a much bigger brand and the NHM is just a subset of it

How do we respond? The watch-word that everyone at 24 Hour Museum adopts is – people are looking for 'stuff', not institutions – and in an online world, museums and galleries have to organise themselves to respond appropriately to their visitors.

That is a very big challenge.

Finance

The European Council conclusions ask Member States to develop “quantitative targets including the associated financial planning on a multi-annual basis for deposit, digitisation, online access and long-term preservation” - hurrah, that should cost about the same as the Olympics, then.

Start with the National Film Archive – so big no-one really knows exactly what is in it but the preservation bill alone could hit £1bn – and that's before you get to the regional archives and, hopefully, before half of what is there disintegrates.

Meanwhile You Tube is sold for \$1.6bn

With a scarcity of resources in the public sector and billions swilling around in the commercial sector, it is obvious that we need to think about partnerships – with BBC/C4/google/Time Warner/Bill and Melinda Gates.... In fact it's already happening

BUT – the web is a bit like a shopping mall – you think you're in a public space until the Grand Met security guards suddenly tell you they don't like the look of you. As the big internet brands get bigger and more powerful, let's not forget that the public sector owns a fabulous wealth of content and scholarship that is going to get more and more valuable the more people realise they can access it easily. Let's be a bit more careful – and hardheaded - about what we're giving away and who we're partnering with.

....and the terms on which we're partnering. 'Accessibility' doesn't just mean being able to find something on the web – it means being able to download it and do things with it – 'accessibility' should mean a workshop where people can do things, not just a shop window into which they can peer.

The government has wisely shied away from attempting to regulate the Internet – but, perhaps because of that reluctance, we haven't had enough of a debate about this issue. We know the old world paradigms don't hold good, but let's at least try to ensure that when we've worked out what the new world paradigms are, we don't discover that we've given away everything of value and that some yet-to-be-invented son of google controls access to everything we've got.

The challenge is - how should public ownership manifest itself?

Terminology

We use inappropriate analogues for new ideas and new services.

Culture-on-line isn't culture online – it's a funding stream.

24Hour Museum isn't a 24 hour museum – it's.....? we've just embarked on a big exercise to work out what we think we are; what our visitors visit us for; and what we should call ourselves. We may well end up calling it the 24 Hour Museum but we need to go back to first principles before we come to that decision.

And the European Digital Library – won't be – I hope. It will be an evolving network.

On the other hand - My Space is... My Space – the title doesn't tell you what it is. It defines itself entirely in its own terms.

My point is terminology is not just something superficial. It needs to grow out of the process or product it's describing. We don't think hard enough about it.

We need to unpick processes and outcomes more carefully when we think about names and structures. We're not 'first-principles' enough.

The design studio for Hyundai cars, the Korean car company, is in Worthing. When I visited they told me that when they design a car it's not done on the premise that the new car will be built in an existing factory – they design the factory and the production process as they design the car. They go back to square one every time.

That's what we need to do. 'Digital' no longer means 'digitising' what is already in a museum or a book – it has to be looked at in its own terms, and that's a tough challenge.

Leadership

The Council proposal for a European project – or series of projects – is hugely ambitious – to “improve framework conditions for digitisation and online accessibility of cultural material and digital preservation”, as the Conclusions propose, will need sophisticated thinking and broad partnerships.

In Britain, we're in a strong position to take a leadership role.

- We have great, genuinely 'world-class' institutions
- Imaginative people with the skills and understanding to contribute to its success – not just in the museum and gallery sector but also in the BBC, the Arts Council, the Film Council, in hugely successful digital businesses like CFC Framestore – one of the world's leading special effects houses.
- And we have a government and governmental agencies with a lot of experience, the past mistakes are as useful for the future as the successes.

We also have a Treasury-driven Comprehensive Spending Review which has “preparing for the digital future” as one of its five key themes. Perhaps we are not making as robust a case as should be made to the Treasury that our sector is right at the heart of that process for most people in Britain.

In addition, there is an emerging public commitment to media literacy and a re-newed interest in creativity in the education system – how can we connect with those trends in the most productive way?

To work towards a unified strategy makes sense but that doesn't mean we have to have one monolithic body or one national institution doing it all. The quirky little ones are usually the most creative.

There are models to learn from – I can't resist saying Channel 4 is one of them – a big corporation, publicly owned, brilliantly marketed, with a clearly defined personality of its own. But actually, it's almost a 'virtual company' –

the content is made by literally hundreds of creative businesses, big and small, - and none of them feel they're losing their personality in the process.

And, though it may seem a paradoxical note to finish on at this moment when we're all talking about the speed of change, it seems appropriate, on this morning after the Oscars, to offer you a pithy saying from Mae West – "if a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing slowly".

This is a hugely important debate with big implications for the future of our culture. Let's make sure we don't jump at solutions – we need to take the time it takes to find the people we need, the partnerships we need, the language we need, the thinking we need - to get it right.