

As the British Library's Head of Digital Scholarship, **Adam Farquhar** is redefining the library's research role. David Kettle finds out how.

Adam Farquhar, the British Library's Head of Digital Scholarship, sums up his department's activities enthusiastically and succinctly: "We get content into digital form, and then we get it into the hands of researchers, innovators, artists, so that they can do something novel and exciting with it."

"For instance, under the non-print legal deposit regulations that came into force in 2013, we harvest the UK web to build up a national archive of non-print published material," he explains. "My team also has responsibility for managing all of our own digitisation work, often in partnerships with commercial or philanthropic organisations. I'm also director of the Endangered Archives Programme, which funds digitisation projects around the world in environments where there is archival material that's endangered due to fire, flood, famine, political unrest—all sorts of reasons—making it available for research on the web."

Significantly, though, Farquhar has noted the unpredictability of who will use the library's digital content and what they'll be using it for. Which opens up all kinds of questions in terms of rights, control of information, and keeping track of how it's being used, not to mention collaborating with users on the ways they want to interact with the data in the first place.

"There's been a transformation in the way researchers and others are thinking about exploiting our digital content," he explains. "It's a co-evolution in terms of what's possible on both sides—we're both leading the way and being led. The increased usage of digital content is having a profound impact on expectations of what we should offer, but we can also sometimes enable people to do things they didn't know they could do with our stuff."

One way the library engages with users' new expectations is through British Library Labs. "It's very much focused on engagement," says Farquhar, "so we run a competition for people who say they have a research idea they could realise with our digital content, but that they can't achieve with the existing interfaces and access."

Library of Possibilities





The winning research proposal gets to collaborate with the library in the ways required, and the British Library team gets precious insights into the new ideas and requirements being dreamt up by researchers and developers. “We’ve seen some really neat things,” says Farquhar. “In the competition’s second year, a guy called Bob Nicholson built up a database of Victorian humour from monograph and newspaper sources, so that he could work out what the rules are and why Victorian humour is so dire! That’s a really nice example of using a corpus of material as a data set that can then support additional analysis.”

Farquhar’s department has also recently worked with Microsoft on digitising 65,000 volumes of out-of-copyright material. “We found that people were particularly interested in the illustrations, so we snipped them out digitally, and again created a sort of data set of just over a million images, which we’ve shared openly on Flickr Commons. It’s been up for about 18 months, and we’ve had over 250 million image views.”

He’s been astonished by some of the usage of the material —including a large-scale installation based entirely on the images by California-based artist David Normal, presented at last year’s Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert. And he acknowledges that this kind of open usage has been challenging for some. “In a lot of ways, it’s a very non-library thing to do—libraries hate putting things out there without any context—but it’s been a really interesting sea change in thinking.”

A further challenge, Farquhar accepts, is seeking to define the institution’s digital offering to its users, especially with developments in technology presenting new opportunities all the time. “The kind of thing libraries like to do is to talk to their users, listen very closely, think hard about designing something that will be just right for them, then go off for a couple of years to implement it. But the expectations that researchers have at the moment aren’t well defined. In this context, that would mean we’d crystallise requirements that people don’t quite have, and put together a system that would deliver them when they no longer have those requirements.”

The answer, he accepts, is likely to be a combination of standardising some aspects of the library’s digital offering, and leaving others far more open. “It might be closer to a case of: I’ll give you a virtual machine and superfast access to lots of content, but you’re going to have to use your own tools. Which for some researchers is awesome, because they say you’d never have understood my tools in the first place.”

Another area under constant development is the digital department’s relationship with the institution’s own staff. “A couple of years ago we started a digital scholarship training programme to give our curatorial staff the knowledge and confidence to deal with digital content and with researchers who might want to use it in ways that are quite different from what might traditionally have been anticipated. The engagement from staff has been fantastic.” It has, says Farquhar, been an incredibly positive experience to witness the British Library team’s increasingly sophisticated approach. And that surely bodes well for the future of digital scholarship. ▴

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British Library, St Pancras.
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2- Basements at British
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3- Aerial view of British
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