



People in the News

Roly Keating

In November 2011, the British Library announced that after 12 years in post, Dame Lynne Brindley would be stepping down as Chief Executive at the end of July 2012. Baroness Blackstone, Chairman of the British Library, said in a press statement, “Lynne’s great contribution has been to redefine the British Library for the 21st century, to ensure its relevance and vitality in the digital age and that the Library remains a leader in the global information network”. This set the bar very high for Lynne’s successor.

Roly Keating took up the post in September 2012. Born in 1961, he graduated from Balliol College, Oxford, in 1983 with a first class degree in Classics, before joining the BBC as a general trainee the same year. He later became Controller of BBC Two (during which time he oversaw the launch of a number of popular series, including *Dragons’ Den*, *Coast*, *Springwatch* and *The Apprentice*), eventually becoming Director of Archive Content, a role which made him overall editorial leader for the BBC’s online services, including BBC iPlayer.

To mark his first year in post at the British Library, *Insights* took the opportunity to catch up with Roly and see how things are progressing. Your Editor began by asking a little about his career before arriving at the British Library, having come from a broadcasting background. “I began my career as a programme maker at the BBC, specializing in arts documentaries for strands such as *Arena* and *Omnibus...*”, he said. “For a number of years I was the editor of *The Late Show* and, appropriately enough, *Bookmark*. In 1997 I took a step into the digital world when I became head of programming at UKTV and, subsequently, controller of BBC digital channels.”

Roly then continued, “My background in cultural broadcasting came to the fore again in 2001, when I became the first Controller of BBC4 and oversaw the channel from its launch until 2003, when I worked for six months on the BBC’s charter review project. From 2004 to 2008 I was Controller of BBC2, which was a hugely exciting role, and latterly I was director of archive content, which included the development and launch of the iPlayer and the roll-out of the BBC’s strategy to enable digital access to its vast archives.”

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When asked how he sees his role as the Chief Executive of a national library, he started by saying, “It is very rare and special to have the opportunity to lead one of the UK’s great cultural institutions. Over the past year, I’ve got to know many of the teams and individuals around the Library and I’ve been struck by the pride, passion and commitment to high



The piazza of the BL building at St Pancras, London. Photo by Paul Grundy

quality service that comes through in a huge diversity of different areas – from digital preservation to document supply to the reference teams working in our reading rooms.”

Looking closer to home, he added, “My role as part of that wider network of teams is to help the British Library achieve its goal of becoming one of the indispensable destinations on the web for anyone with a commitment to doing serious research.”

Roly is very aware of the huge challenges facing both him and the organization. “On the one hand we’re trying to open up our historic collections to a wider audience than has ever been possible, through mass digitization initiatives such as our partnership with Brightsolid to scan 40 million pages of historic newspapers and make them fully searchable. On the other, we’re collecting a whole new universe of material in the form of born-digital and online content, which we have the responsibility to collect, care for and make available for future generations of users. These are huge challenges and, given the context of substantial real-terms cuts to funding, a keen sense of our priorities and purposes as an organization is essential.”

His background and experience of digital broadcasting will no doubt be proving invaluable in his current role, but your Editor was keen to find out how he feels his broader experience at the BBC is informing his current role. “A year in, I can say that my role at the Library draws upon almost every aspect of my experience at the BBC. In the past few years in particular I’ve very much focused on the digital world: the challenges that face a large organization that has vast swathes of legacy content are common to both the BBC and the Library.”

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He continued, “Beyond the digital archive, there are strong family resemblances in the ways in which the BBC takes quite demanding material and turns it into stories that can reach a general audience. At the Library, our curatorial teams regularly take complex, even arcane subject matter and expose it to a wide audience through great exhibitions or digitized items on our website.”

He pointed to "... our recent exhibition on Propaganda [which] was a great example in that it took a challenging question – what is propaganda and how does it impact our lives? – and explored a multitude of possible responses, drawing upon collections ranging from wartime leaflets airdropped onto occupied Europe to tweets responding to some of the biggest events of recent times. Not only did it reveal some of our most fascinating collection items, it also clearly stimulated tens of thousands of visitors, who went on to respond online and recommend the experience to others. There's a hunger for ideas out there and the Library is ideally positioned to feed and further stimulate that hunger."

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September 2013 marked the end of Roly's first year in post, so your Editor asked what Roly would like people to see as his major achievements in that period. "I can still hardly believe it's been a year already! In terms of the Library's achievements, these are all, always huge team efforts – the quality, range and sheer diversity of what the Library does is a constant source of wonder, and pride."

In singling out specific achievements, Roly noted, "A continuing achievement, which month-by-month is ticking off a succession of major milestones, is our Newspaper Programme, which aims to move the national newspaper collection out of the outdated facility at Colindale, and into a state-of-the-art storage building at our Boston Spa site in West Yorkshire. Last December, we had only just completed the shell of the massive new Newspaper Storage Building; we have now completed the installation of the high-density and fully automated storage racking, and we're in the process of testing the system in advance of ingesting some 750 million pages of local, regional and national newspapers, spanning more than three centuries."



Culture Minister Ed Vaizey and Roly inside the new newspaper storage facility at Boston Spa

Photo by Kippa Matthews

He was keen to point out that "The scale and complexity of the project, which will offer access to the collection via a dedicated reading room at St Pancras, is mind-boggling. Most importantly, it will safeguard the long-term future of the collection by ensuring that all our print newspapers and periodicals are held in archival-standard conditions for the first time ever. The implementation will continue well into next year, but in terms of future legacy, this is a programme that the current generation of people staffing the British Library will be remembered for."

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Clearly there are great strides being made at the British Library, but inevitably many challenges lie ahead. During her tenure Roly's predecessor, Lynne Brindley, steered the Library through a period of great change in response to the changing information

229 environment, so it was interesting to explore what Roly sees as the legacy of that change, and the major challenges he believes that he faces over the next decade.

"I initially got to know Dame Lynne when I was still at the BBC and our respective organizations were partnering on a range of very exciting projects, from TV arts documentaries to Radio 4's The Listening Project. Even then, it was very clear that the Library was one of the most formidably forward-thinking cultural institutions in terms of its digital ambitions."

Reflecting on Lynne Brindley's work, Roly said "That profile, ambition and very substantive achievement is Lynne's legacy at the Library – having inherited an institution that was primarily analogue, she helped develop it into a genuine hybrid of physical and digital, both in terms of its collections, and in terms of the ways its users interact with it...". He went on to add, "The extension last April of legal deposit regulations to encompass digital and online publications, as well as traditional print formats, was a decade in the making. Lynne was very much the driving force behind that change, of which we and future generations of researchers will be the beneficiaries."

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Roly speaking at the launch of Digital Legal Deposit in April 2013

Moving on to look at the challenges that he and the Library face in the future, Roly reflected, "Looking ahead, the torrent of material that we now have the power and responsibility to collect presents formidable challenges of its own. The very first full crawl of the UK web domain by our web archiving team captured some 31 terabytes of material – which we now need to preserve, store and make accessible in perpetuity. The challenge this represents is colossal, but teams across the organization have already worked together to bring us this far. The expertise and creativity they bring to bear on the thorniest of problems will help us continue our evolution into becoming a genuinely digital library."

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And so, leaving Roly to ponder the colossal amount of work that lies ahead of him, your Editor finished the interview by asking whether Roly gets much time to just switch off and unwind. "Well, our children are still growing up, so family life looms large. Beyond family, there's theatre, cinema, reading and walking – long walks by the seaside are a particular favourite. I do also like cycling, although these days, I rarely seem to cycle far beyond the tube station!"