



People in the News

John Scally

If any information professional is feeling tired or jaded, I recommend an hour with John Scally. His enthusiasm for libraries, and the role they serve, is both refreshing and stimulating. John's passion for libraries and understanding of their importance in our intellectual history began at the University of Cambridge, where he gained a PhD in History. This awakened a love of rare books, resulting in his first library job as curator in the British Antiquarian Division at the National Library of Scotland in 1993. As this role progressed, John became involved in many projects, not least running an exhibition and producing a book on Robert Louis Stevenson. John told me, 'I love projects and love getting involved in projects, especially digital projects.' By 2002, John reached an important milestone in his career, being appointed Deputy Head of Rare Books at the National Library of Scotland.

However, two years later, he left the National Library when he was recruited to the University of Edinburgh as Director of University Collections and Deputy Director of Library, Museums and Galleries. Here he was responsible for special collections and also, most interestingly for John, museums and galleries too. John says that this wider portfolio increased his purview of the issues around not only the physical world of collections, but those of the impending digital world which was coming over like a tidal wave. He recalled that, at that time, museums and galleries were thinking much more widely and actively about how to engage with audiences. This is when he first learned to segment his audience. John says that this phrase, 'segmenting the audience', sounds slightly medical, but it is important because it allows you to think about your audience as a series of populations and a series of groups that have specific requirements of you as a service provider. Fairly swiftly, John became Deputy Librarian and then, following the retirement of Sheila Cannell and after a competitive process, he became Director of Library and University Collections at the University of Edinburgh, bringing those two roles and portfolios together. After three years, and another competitive process, John returned to the National Library of Scotland, but this time as Chief Executive and National Librarian.

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John had only recently taken up this new post when I caught up with him for this interview. My first question for him was about the difference between being director of a university library and chief executive of a national library. John said, 'I thought they would be more similar than I now perceive them to be even after two months in the new role. In a university you have an identifiable audience: undergraduates, postgraduates, academics and university staff – we often forget the staff, who are increasingly using the library services in interesting

4 ways for their own business and for their own practice.' John explained that this identifiable audience provides a clear target for service delivery. He particularly enjoyed the fact the university audience is 'not shy in coming forward and telling you what they want'. In fact, John found this transparent and slightly disputational aspect of service development in a high performing university both stimulating and thrilling.

John explained that what is very different and interesting in a national library is that the audience is not limited. 'I have a much broader audience now: at its most basic, the whole of Scotland. There is an expectation that certain things should be done by the National Library of Scotland; it has to be the primary memory institution, bringing together content that reflects the generations and the key issues of scholarship.'

Meeting the expectations of such a wide audience base will be challenging, but John believes this can be addressed by getting back to the fundamental principles: thinking about what a national library should be doing and who it should be serving; thinking about the role of public, specialist and higher education libraries, what they are providing and how the National Library fits in at the centre of that network. 'My view is that the National Library is there as the memory institution, a reference library. You can't borrow books but at the heart, dead centre, is research. It is there to provide the facilities to promote and advance research in the widest sense, starting with Scotland and going out.'

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John says that success for a national library comes not from saying it is all about public service, but by starting with our current and future collections and where we can provide the most telling outcomes. Those key principles of getting and surfacing the right content and focusing on preserving and making it available mean that other areas can be provided for more richly and adequately by, for example, creating learning zones, supporting the school curriculum, supporting continuous professional development and through an offering to business.

John is keen to turn these wider audiences into partners. Previously, the National Library described readers, researchers and students as customers. John said, 'I am moving away from that customer model at warp speed, seeing our users as a community who can work with us, who can consume our services and who can come and physically enjoy the exhibitions. Also, moving to a much more open model, so that the user community can reuse, tag, interact and get under the bonnet with us and help us to repurpose the content we are generating. I am thinking about this idea of a "data foundry", so that over the next five years, we have open content for reuse, so that users can take out and do things with that data and content that we couldn't even imagine as librarians.'

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The idea of memory will figure strongly in the new five-year strategy. As the primary memory institution of Scotland, preservation will be an important theme. John explained that the National Library has to take a much longer view as well as the shorter generational view of both digital (including social media) and analogue content, so that it reflects through the generations what the key issues around research scholarship and knowledge are.

John pointed out that another difference is that a National Library is much closer to government. 'We have a different governance structure, we have a board, we have subcommittees, we have a sponsor unit inside the government and it is not different from any other non-departmental public body around the UK. There is a mechanical thing that needs to be understood in terms of how these work, how they need to be satisfied in terms of where you are going and how you can use them and leverage them as principal supporters for your business.'

An aspect of the new role that John finds appealing is that, as a public figure, he is invited to events and to present awards, which means getting to know new groups of writers, researchers, academics and others in Scotland. However, he reminded me that the National

5 Library is not just about Scotland and Scottish content, it is also about mapping and logging the history of how Scotland has developed as a country. He gives as an example how the Enlightenment in Scotland was informed through the consummation of information and history from elsewhere: 'Reading the works of Italian authors helped us to understand our own way of writing literature and poetry', he explained.

John believes in moments: moments in politics and moments in technology, and he finds it interesting to map them and see how they play out. The whole debate in Scotland about the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014 is such a moment. John points to the 95% of the population who registered to vote and the 85% of the eligible electorate who voted in the Referendum. 'These are unbelievable figures for citizen engagement', said John. 'That discussion was around politics and independence but it drew in cultural awareness and what it means to be a nation and what those identity issues were.' The National Library has set up a project, 'Collecting the Referendum', to collect, catalogue and make accessible as much of the Referendum material as possible to provide a set of resources that will be used as people reflect on the Referendum.

'In my view the National Library has a good moment here', John suggested, 'to consider its role, as those debates continue, defining again and bringing to the foreground some of those things we have already done. For example, as a librarian I am interested and quite thrilled that behind the scenes in the National Library of Scotland we are responsible for the national bibliography and as librarians that is an important thing. The printed outputs, the digital outputs, that whole sense of what is the published memory of Scotland and how that is brought to the surface and how it is made available, those things will come through more prominently in the strategy. I am playing around with words like "the guardian of the national printed heritage" to express what we do in a way that captures the zeitgeist, but also has a longer view, confirming our role rather than just jumping on a bandwagon. When I talk about the published memory of Scotland I mean the digital published memory and the physical published memory. I am trying not to separate those things out but see them as a piece of work that has to be done.'

'We are still in the incunabular phase of the digital experience'

John is also thinking imaginatively about how the National Library can bring more of the knowledge and memory of Scotland online. 'We are still in the incunabular phase of the digital experience, the early years. It feels like it has been around for a long time, but when you actually look at the history of print, it is quite an early period and that sets us serious challenges', explained John. 'What keeps me awake at night is that there is a time limit on this now, there is a younger generation coming through who are digital to their fingertips and that sense of encountering and trying to excavate physical content in a library is going to be much more odd to them as an information gathering experience. I am a very simple person, so I believe in getting the basics right. The basic proposition is that we will bring all of the analogue physical content in the National Library online in the next decade – but the devil is in the detail! This does not mean we are going to digitize and OCR all of it, or translate all of the Latin manuscripts, but what it does mean is that we will have a set of digital resources that will allow you to mine and to understand the contours of our collections, whether that is manuscripts, rare books, legal deposit or electronic content. There will be an inventory so that even if you don't get the actual digital content, then at least you will know that something is there, something that might well be very useful for your research, or your learning, or for your continuous professional development or just because you are interested in a subject.'

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John explained that the National Library is also going to make a commitment to digitize a percentage of the analogue collections, with imaginative use of digitization on demand. 'If for example you are interested in an out-of-copyright book on the history of Caithness that has never been digitized and we have a copy of it, we can digitize it,' explained John. 'The cost model is a matched £30 and for that, you will have a digital copy within three weeks, but you will also be sponsoring the digitization so that everyone in the world can see that book.'

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Although its collections are at the heart of the National Library, all aspects including its estates have to be run as a business, and John is keen that the business will be an exemplar of good practice. Engaging all of the National Library staff in that mission is a passion. That is why in the second week in the role, at 5:30 in the morning, John attended a meeting of the National Library's cleaning staff. They challenged him, keen to know what their role would be in his new strategy. John is a competitive man, and ambitious that within the next five years the National Library of Scotland should be widely regarded as one of the best national libraries in Europe. 'If we are going to be the best', John explained to them, 'the place has to be spotless – being clean and tidy is vitally important!'

You certainly can't become one of the best national libraries in Europe if you are a bit slovenly, and there is certainly nothing slovenly about John. Within the first six months in his new role, he will have in place a strategy for the next five years. He is keen that success against this strategy is measured with transparent and stretching targets – what John calls 'scary targets'. We will watch with interest as John brings together the two roles combined in his title (National Librarian and Chief Executive), seeing how that plays out in Scotland and for the Institution, but I have a sense that we will be seeing the unexpected coming out of this National Library.

John Scally was interviewed for 'Insights' by Lorraine Estelle.



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