

International cooperation in the global information society, the BnF meets the challenge

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Abstract:

In 1998, the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) set up an International Relations Division in order to better coordinate and strengthen its international activities.

To share, to welcome and to promote: these 3 goals have been at the very heart of its action ever since.

The international action of the BnF can be illustrated in many ways: cooperation agreements with libraries around the world (China, Spain, United States, Poland, Iran, Morocco, Quebec, Tunisia); over 20 projects in partnership, including 3 European projects ; participation in 60 organisations or professional associations (IFLA, LIBER, CDNL, CENL, IAML, CERL, IIPC...); 40 trainees and 8 professionals hosted through the *Profession Culture* programme, over a thousand visitors of nearly 50 countries welcomed every single year, a presence in over 60 exhibitions abroad and nearly 1500 documents lent annually to external exhibitions.

This paper intends to describe how the BnF's International Relations Division has faced the new challenges posed by the global information society during the last two decades, what tools have been put in place to coordinate the involvement of the BnF departments, ensure the monitoring of some 200 actions per year, and finally evaluate a rather complex constellation of activities.

Keywords: International relations, Bibliothèque nationale de France, European projects, Digital French-speaking network, Profession Culture programme

Since the beginning, the BnF has been a part of the destiny of a major world power. Guardian of a national and universal heritage, heir to an encyclopaedic and humanist tradition, bearer of universal values, ambassador for a language spoken on all five continents, BnF contributes to the inter-culture dialogue.

In 1998, it decided to create an International Relations division to coordinate and strengthen its international activities. The goals have always been to encourage access for as many people as

possible - from researcher to general public - to the Nation's heritage as a component of the universal heritage, to share expertise and know-how in the context of globalisation and to spread French culture and language under the banner of cultural diversity.

The political framework for the BnF international action is the cultural action of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs founded on the principles of cooperation and solidarity; the priorities are European Construction and the French-speaking world. The cultural action of the Ministry of Culture and Communication, with the emphasis on welcoming foreign cultures and cultural diversity, is also a component of the political framework.

These major focal points incorporate the strategic priorities of the BnF itself, listed in a multi-year performance contract drawn up by the library and validated and signed by the Ministry of Culture and Communication.

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Sharing expertise and achievements

Based on Action 5.1 of Objective 5 in the 2009-2013 performance contract - "Be a key player in major international digital libraries" -, the International Relations division has enrolled the institution in the major initiatives dealing with access and promotion of digital collections: EUROPEANA and the European projects, the *Réseau Francophone numérique* (RFN - Digital French-speaking Network), the World Digital Library (WDL) and several bilateral partnerships constructed around common themes. To this is added the decision to become a stakeholder in the IMPACT Centre of Competence in digitisation.

At European **multilateral level**, the BnF¹ has been involved since 2005 in TEL/The European Library, is behind the flagship cultural initiative of the European Commission, EUROPEANA, and is committed to many European projects.

TEL/The European Library² is a unique portal to both digital (books, posters, periodicals, sound recordings, photos, videos, etc.) and bibliographic resources. It provides access to more than 150 million resources from the collections of 48 national libraries in 35 languages. It also provides an access to virtual exhibitions promoting the digital collections of its partners. The BnF not only provides access via TEL to eleven million bibliographic records in its catalogue and 2.1 million documents in Gallica³, its digital library, but also provides expertise in processing bibliographic and digital information to the TEL working groups.

Europeana⁴ is financed by the European Commission and the Ministries of Culture in Member States. Users can explore, share, use and journey among the European heritage collections of libraries, archives, museums and audiovisual institutes: books, manuscripts, photographs, tables, television programmes, films, sculptures, objects, partitions, sound recordings, etc. From *La Jeune fille à la perle* to Newton's laws of motion via Mozart or televised news archives, in March 2013 Europeana gave access to more than 26 million digital objects (texts, images, sounds, videos), online and on tablets, smartphones and API (application programming interfaces). Europeana has become a creative and digital economy player in Europe, thereby offering new perspectives to all individuals to learn, create and blossom both personally and professionally. In addition, Bruno Racine, President of the BnF, has been President of the Europeana Foundation since 2011. BnF plays an active role in building

¹ www.bnf.fr

² www.theeuropeanlibrary.org

³ www.gallica.fr

⁴ www.europeana.eu

up this European digital library alongside other French players such as the Ministry of Culture and Communication (collections.fr), the *Institut national de l'Audiovisuel* (National Audiovisual Institute) and the *Cité de la Musique* (City of Music). France is in fact one of Europeana's main providers, with close to about 2.6 million objects (March 2013). The BnF also supports the expansion of Europeana through such European digitisation and aggregation projects as Europeana Regia, Europeana Collections 1914-1918 and Europeana Newspapers.

BnF views its participation in projects supported by the European Commission and other European partners - libraries, museums, research centres and private companies - as a priority in its European cooperation. This means considerable human, scientific, technical and financial investment and strong strategic and operational involvement.

The establishment's strategy and missions dictate the choice of research and development projects: digitisation and OCR research, long-term digital preservation and conservation. In addition, the BnF is now heavily involved in content growth or aggregation projects to supply Europeana.

The BnF is currently involved in four European projects:

- Europeana Collections 1414-1918⁵ to constitute a collection on the 1914-1918 War accessible via Europeana. The BnF is a content provider under this project, alongside the BDIC (*Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine* - Library of Contemporary International Documentation) and the library of the Ministry of Defence. It will also supply to the British Library, tasked with creating the educational site, editorial content from its collaboration with the Educational Action and Multimedia Publication departments of the BnF.
- Europeana Awareness⁶, to promote Europeana to the general public, policymakers and cultural institutions. In this context, the BnF will organise, in November 2013, alongside the Interministerial Department of the National Archives, the CNC/Film Archives, the Mission du Centenaire (Centenary Mission) and other French partners in some forty institutions across France, the "Grande Collecte 1914-1918". The aim is to raise awareness of private individuals in possession of documents related to the Great War, such as private diaries, logbooks, correspondence, photographs, leaflets and posters, etc., and encourage them to have them digitised.
- Europeana Newspapers⁷, to facilitate public access to the articles in the daily European press with a target of 29 million newspaper pages available via Europeana. This project is focusing on optimising the automatic recognition of press articles and on the semantic enrichment of metadata relating to these contents (formatting, regional newspapers, change in the name of the newspaper, publishers, presence of images, photographs, drawings, tables and graphics; editorial type contents, headlines, publicity, advertisements, columns, etc.). The BnF will provide three million pages from its collections of daily newspapers; a selection of titles will be processed in an innovative way: the recognition of named entities (this involves distinguishing the names of places, people and institutions in a text).
- the two-year SUCCEED⁸ project will set out to promote the results of research into digitisation and OCR processing achieved under the IMPACT Centre of Competence.

The IMPACT Centre of Competence⁹ was created in the wake of the eponymous European project. It aims to formulate and make available best digitisation practices to improve access to historical texts.

⁵ www.europeana-collections-1914-1918.eu

⁶ www.europeana.eu

⁷ www.europeana-newspapers.eu

⁸ www.succeed-project.eu

⁹ www.digitisation.eu

It is hosted and managed by the *Fundación Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantès* and the University of Alicante in Spain, supported by the British Library, the national libraries of France and the Netherlands, the Fraunhofer Research Institute, the Institute for Dutch Lexicology, the Poznan Supercomputing Centre and the company Contentra Technologies. Apart from its membership, the BnF, which has the status of Premium Member, has committed to making available to the Centre of Competence its OCR experience, hosting conferences and promoting it to both its French-speaking network and to Europeana.

The BnF, as a founder member of the RFN (Digital French-speaking network), occupies a front-running strategic role in terms of the **French-speaking world**. This alliance currently unites 24 major institutions tasked to preserve and disseminate the French-speaking cultural heritage with the active support of the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF - International Organisation of the Francophonie).

The RFN¹⁰ is pursuing three goals: use digitisation to preserve a heritage that is frequently under threat of vanishing and disseminate it to a wide audience; transfer know-how to an increasing number of documentary institutions in the French-speaking world by organising training placements, developing teaching materials and constant trading of information; provide a forum for exchanges over the issues of the digital era to the heritage institutions of the French-speaking area.

Secondly, an unprecedented initiative was taken in 2009 with the exceptional gift of 500,000 works from the legal deposit covering the period 1996 to 2006 at the Library of Alexandria. The collaboration between these two establishments will ultimately culminate in the development of a Franco-Arab regional platform including a centre of French-speaking resources and a training hub for library and documentation professions for Egypt and the Middle East.

The BnF also signed two conventions in 2012 with the major bodies for dissemination French culture - the *Institut français* (IF - French Institute) and the *Centre national du livre* (CNL - National Book Centre). The convention with the French Institute, an operator since 2012 of the cultural action outside France and under the authority of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is intended to carry out joint actions in favour of the French-speaking world in particular, the promotion of Gallica and the circulation of contents and resources for young people on Culturethèque, its digital platform, and the establishment of a programme of joint meetings of French-speaking authors. The agreement with the CNL, a public establishment under the Ministry of Culture and Communication, sets out to create "French corners" within foreign national libraries (the first of these French corners was launched at the National Library of Vietnam in April 2013), support the preservation of the Haitian heritage by facilitating the acquisition of books by Haitian authors published in France and encourage the description, digitisation and online availability of a unique set of prestigious holdings linked to the presence of France in the Middle East.

At **international** level, the BnF has joined the World Digital Library (WDL)¹¹. This Unesco-sponsored initiative from the Library of Congress makes available online, free and in several languages, outstanding documents from all over the world, provides resources for education, research and the general public and helps to bridge the digital divide.

Finally, the BnF is behind many **bilateral partnerships** to digitise, put online and promote emblematic cultural heritages, a reflection of historical, scientific and cultural links maintained by France throughout the world. Thus, the portal "La France au Brésil" (France in Brazil) developed, since 2007; with the National Library of Brazil is a window on the history of explorations and colonial history. The "Sinica" portal, designed with the National Library of China, aims at building a corpus on Sinology. The "Presse ottomane en français" (Ottoman press in French) project testifies to the significance of French in the Middle East at the end of the 19th century. The "France-Poland" project endorses the multi-century links between the two nations. The last project to date covers the

¹⁰ www.rfnum.org

¹¹ www.wdl.org

relations between France and Japan. These thematic partnerships do not simply illustrate the global destiny of a nation and the desire to nourish scientific cooperation beyond its frontiers. They also underline the vital importance henceforth assumed by editorial content in digital libraries. The question of democratisation and access to all, a key issue of digital libraries, is also achieved through educational paths and the development of contents.

Trading and sharing know-how **within professional networks** is another key objective of the library. For this reason, the BnF is involved in some sixty networks, either as a founder member (AIBM, CERL, EROMM, IIPC, ISNI, TEL/The European Library to name just a few) or as a member of governing bodies (CENL and the EUROPEANA Foundation, for example). This is without counting the twenty or so organisations where it contributes to scientific and technical working groups (EURIG, IASA, LIBER, iPRES, SIBMAS, VIAF, etc).

It is more especially involved in the IFLA bodies, with representatives elected to the standing committees of seventeen sections and the hosting of the IFLA-PAC, one of the core IFLA programmes.

The focal points of its participation in the networks revolve around standardisation aspects, innovative bibliographic technologies and tools (adaptation and translation of the RAMEAU subject heading list, the VIAF virtual international authority file¹² and the International Internet Preservation Consortium (IIPC)¹³, to give just a few examples) and the associations or consortiums around the cultural heritage topic (music and audiovisual with AIBM, ancient book with CERL or the performing arts with SIBMAS).

Welcome: a multi-faceted offer

The National Library of France has increased its opportunities for hosting foreign professionals and researchers over the years. Several kinds are proposed: the Profession Culture programme and collective and/or individual traineeships.

The BnF welcomes culture professionals from all over the world every year to its **Profession Culture** programme¹⁴. During their stay lasting three months on average, and supported by a BnF tutor, they devote their time to studying a theme, a holding or a project closely linked to the library's activities. This programme was set up by the Ministry of Culture in 2003, with one of its priorities being international action. Supplemented by the cultural establishments under its supervision, its watchword is mutual exchange. It seeks to transmit in-depth experience of French culture practices and to encourage the formation of sustainable exchange networks between the French institutions and their international counterparts and, more broadly, to develop cultural relations between the country of origin and France. Hosting a resident often constitutes a first decisive stage in establishing a partnership. Once back in his own country, each resident will have optimised his know-how and knowledge and will have formed a network of French correspondents.

At the same time, the BnF also offers an annual **collective traineeship** on topics relating to its centres of excellence. These traineeships held jointly with the *Bibliothèque Publique d'Information* (Bpi - Public Information Library) are intended for experienced professionals from national libraries or large research libraries and mainly cover conservation, services to the public and new technologies, audiovisual and digital documents.

The BnF responds to request for **individual traineeships** on a case-by-case basis according to the availability of the services sought. The candidates must meet pre-defined induction criteria, including good knowledge of French and the development of skills relating directly to national library missions.

¹² www.viaf.org

¹³ <http://netpreserve.org/>

¹⁴ www.bnf.fr/fr/professionnels/profession_culture.html

Finally, many meetings with counterparts from other foreign cultural institutions on set topics and **visits** from groups of associations of professionals take place in the library. Thus, the various BnF sites welcomed more than a thousand visitors from nearly fifty countries in 2012.

Promoting cultural heritage and disseminating the "BnF label"

Promoting cultural heritage occurs fundamentally through **exhibitions** in partnership with foreign cultural institutions, organised abroad or hosted by the BnF, or through cultural heritage documents being loaned to other institutions. Sample exhibitions are "Manuscrits flamands" (Flemish manuscripts) organised jointly with the Royal Library of Belgium or "En Français dans le texte" (In French in the text), which was mounted in ten Chinese cities in 2012.

BnF exhibitions always include amazing virtual exhibitions¹⁵ that allow remote access and keep the event permanent.

The BnF organises partnership meetings or events around world cultures all year long. Conferences are recorded and then uploaded onto the site.

Finally, the purpose of international action is to **spread the "BnF label"**, with emphasis on French but also other languages (English, Spanish, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, Japanese and Chinese) and by encouraging the circulation of our scientific and cultural activities by "selling" the BnF expertise, services and products.

What tools to coordinate, welcome, relay, inform, monitor and assess this action better?

The presentation above shows just how far the international action is diverse and provided: some fifteen cooperation agreements with libraries (Brazil, China, Spain, Korea, Japan, Poland, Iran, Morocco, Quebec, Tunisia, etc.), over twenty projects in partnership, including currently four European projects, participation in sixty or so professional organisations or associations (IFLA, LIBER, CDNL, CENL, AIB, CERL, IIPC, etc.), annual placements for forty trainees, five Profession Culture residencies and over one thousand visitors from some fifty countries welcomed in 2013, presence in over sixty exhibitions overseas with several hundred documents loaned every year.

Information, monitoring and assessment tools are in place to coordinate the variety of actions resulting from requests for meetings, visits of exhibitions, supported by extensive internal skills. In addition, the International Relations division welcomes and edits the suggestions from BnF departments and units, for example to prepare draft proposals or traineeships and to pass on information to partners abroad and cultural departments in the French diplomatic network.

An international action base has been formed to group the activities (projects, conventions, visits, traineeships, etc.) carried out by everyone involved in the library. It also offers sheets giving short descriptions of the partner institutions, associations and consortiums. This base is accessible in-house to all BnF agents and is used especially to prepare headlines for dissemination on the Intranet or the BnF website.

In terms of European projects, in-house monitoring meetings, human and financial resource management charts and a Steering Committee are in place. The bilateral cooperation agreements are monitored systematically and the issues and actions to be undertaken can be adjusted based on an annual report.

¹⁵ <http://expositions.bnf.fr/>

A 2010 survey to measure the weight of the BnF in the European and international bodies assessed to what extent participation in the networks, organisations, projects and initiatives is fundamental to its international prestige in terms of visibility, developing its collections and promoting its experts and its involvement in European or international projects. This contribution is also a chance to exchange information, communicate on research in progress and benefit from the experience of other institutions. Finally, this involvement encourages the promotion of the BnF expertise and know-how, thereby opening up perspectives and turning the library into a key player on the world library stage.

Significant human and financial mobilisation is an essential condition of this scale of investment. In 2010, and this remains valid today, apart from the International Relations division and its ten agents, about one hundred agents, sometimes involved in several networks, participate in international organisations. Those among them who draft documents and technical reports devote nearly 25% of their work time to this activity. Overall, an estimated 600,000 euros is spent on all participation in professional networks and on projects, including the budget for the division, the missions, the salaries of personnel involved and membership subscriptions.

And finally, we will underline the significance taken by the BnF international action since this division was created. This increasing momentum illustrates and can measure, in this field like in others, the scale of globalisation.

Several media are available to follow the international activity of the BnF: bnf.fr under heading International action, Chroniques.fr and [@BnFMonde](https://twitter.com/BnFMonde).

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