

The WTO/GATS Agenda for Libraries

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Introduction

In this talk I will briefly consider, firstly, the WTO, then the GATS and finally the implications of the GATS for public libraries in England.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO)

The idea of an international monetary and trading system free of the protectionism of the inter-War years was formulated towards the end of the Second World War. Different organisations and agreements were established, in order to augment this process. These included organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. One of the key agreements established was the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which came into effect in 1948 and 23 countries signed up to it. (see also Rikowski, G, 2001a and 2001b)

The **World Trade Organisation (WTO)** emerged from this process. The WTO is based permanently in Geneva and is controlled by a General Council comprising member states' ambassadors. 148 countries throughout the world are now members of the WTO and participate in these meetings. Even China has recently joined the WTO. Many agreements have and are being made at the WTO, such as the Trade Related Investment Measures (TRIM) and the Financial Services Agreement (FSA). Furthermore, the WTO incorporates a complex Dispute Settlement Process and tribunals operate in secret to settle disputes between member states. In many ways, all this seems very removed from every day life in Britain, and probably even more so, from our everyday working lives in libraries in England. In this talk, I hope to demonstrate how decisions and agreements that are being made so far from home are and will impact on our everyday working lives here, in our public libraries in England.

The WTO can be seen to be one of the main forces behind the globalisation agenda, along with other organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF. Since the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of Soviet Russia, it now seems to be generally accepted that capitalism is the only social system that it is possible to have on our planet. Every day we see examples in the newspapers of how capitalism is spreading more and more rapidly throughout the world – this is '*globalisation*', or more accurately, '*global capitalism*'. There is not time to explore the philosophical arguments here but it is important that we appreciate the reality of the situation that we find ourselves in today. We witness examples of the extension of the market on almost a daily basis.

The General Agreement on Trade in Services (the GATS)

However, this talk will focus on some of the ways that this global capitalist agenda is impacting on libraries, particularly on public libraries in England. There are two main agreements that are being established at the WTO that are having direct implications for libraries and information – these are the GATS (the General Agreement on Trade in Services) and TRIPS (Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights). TRIPS covers many different areas, such as patents and licenses, but copyright issues in relation to knowledge and information are the areas that are of particular concern for librarians. One can question, for example, the extent to which knowledge and information should be encapsulated within an ‘intellectual property right’, as opposed to the idea of information being free for all.

This talk, though, focuses on the GATS. The GATS could have profound effects on all our libraries that are currently owned and run by the state and local authorities – this includes libraries such as public libraries, university libraries, school libraries, and government libraries. As Michel Chussodovsky from the University of Ottawa says:

The clauses of the GATS and their underlying logic would...imply the transformation of libraries into profit making ventures...Already, information is being privatised.

Many argue, or more accurately they *attempt* to argue, that the GATS will not effect our public services. I address this issue in two articles that I have written recently on this topic – *The corporate takeover of libraries* (Rikowski, 2001b) and *GATS: private affluence and public squalor? Implications for libraries and information* (Rikowski, 2001a). The main purpose of the GATS is to ‘liberalise’ trade in services. Thus, various services would fall under the behest of a marketisation agenda, which can ultimately lead to the privatisation of services. Many different services are covered under the GATS – 160 different services in all. Ideally, there needs to be an analysis of how all these different service sectors might be effected by the GATS. However, what concerns me in particular is how our **public services** are likely to be effected. The notion of free public services only really started to materialise around 100 years ago in Britain. The Education Act of 1870 introduced the concept of free education for all. The 1850 Public Libraries Act introduced the idea of free public libraries for all (although this did not become a reality until later). The free National Health Service only came into existence after the 2nd World War. The ‘rights’ that we take for granted today, have been hard fought for in the past. Now, these free public services are under serious threat from the GATS.

Nearly every day we see examples in the newspapers showing how the privatisation agenda is starting to creep into our public services. This is particularly apparent in our schools and our hospitals. Yet many, indeed probably most people do not realise that this is directly linked to the GATS. The GATS seems so far removed from our everyday lives. Many people have not even heard of the GATS, as various opinion polls have demonstrated.

So, why am I arguing that these changes are happening because of the GATS and not just because the New Labour government or some local authority thinks it is a good idea? If one reads the GATS document it becomes very apparent that this is the reality of the situation. Our services have to be 'liberalised' under the GATS – i.e. various services (once this has been agreed amongst the WTO members) have to be traded and commodified in the market place. Once the GATS is fully in place, if a country then does not abide by the rules that it has signed and agreed to, then it can, in effect, be taken to court – to the WTO Dispute Settlement Process. So, this is all very serious. It also means that power no longer resides within national governments and nation states in the way that it has done in the past. Tony Blair is an enthusiastic advocate of the globalisation agenda and he has been pushing trade liberalisation at the recent EU summit in Barcelona. So, he is enthusiastically pushing forward this GATS agenda – even though the agreement itself is not fully in place yet. The result of this is what we witness every day, when we read our newspapers – creeping privatisation of our public services. However, the agenda itself is not being driven primarily by Tony Blair. Rather, it is being driven by the GATS itself.

As I have said, we hear about what is happening to areas such as health and education on almost a daily basis, but libraries, as we are all very well aware, are rarely mentioned in the mainstream media. Thus, the focus of this talk will be specifically on the implications of the GATS for public libraries in England. Other government-funded libraries also need to be investigated, such as academic libraries, but this must wait for another occasion.

'Globalisation and Information' – Special Issue of Information for Social Change

I have recently edited a special issue of *Information for Social Change* on the theme of *Globalisation and Information*. For more general information on this whole topic, I would recommend people to read this. Susan George thanked me when she received her copy, noting that they did not have anything like this on libraries and information before. The issue can be accessed on the web at: <http://libr.org/ISC/TOC.html>. The issue is divided up into 4 different sections. The first section focuses on 'Globalisation and the WTO' in general, providing both background information and some analysis. The second section looks at the GATS itself, once again, providing both background information and analysis and the article by Anneliese Dodds also considers the implication of the GATS for higher education and public libraries. The next section is specifically on libraries. My article in this section considers the likely implications of the GATS for public libraries in England in some depth. I will highlight some of the main points made in this article later in this talk. The final section broadens out again and looks at 'Information and Knowledge' and considers areas such as the commodification of knowledge and information and how this can and is impacting on the global scene. Global capitalism is expanding, extending, deepening and intensifying at an ever-increasing pace. The drive of capital is infinite – it seeks to colonise every section of the globe.

The implications of the GATS for public libraries in England

What then are the implications of the GATS for public libraries in England? In order to have some clear understanding about the GATS it is worthwhile to actually read the GATS agreement itself (1994) which is available on the web at <http://www.wto.org>. The GATS is an agreement, or a set of rules for various services, which is being established at the WTO. As well as including public services such as health, education, libraries and housing GATS also covers many other service sectors, such as tourism, financial services and mobile phones. The set of rules basically stipulates that different nation states that are WTO members must 'offer up' some of their services to the GATS agenda. This means that these services can then be 'liberalised' – they are then placed in the market arena and different suppliers can compete for the opportunity to run these services. In the long-term, this means that many of our public services could be run by private companies rather than by local and/or our national governments. As Clare Joy says in her article in the *Globalisation and Information* issue:

By committing sector to the GATS, governments are agreeing to tilt the balance of power away from themselves and their citizens and towards the needs of corporations. GATS will have an enormous impact on the ability of governments to pursue objectives in their service sector which conflict with the needs of companies trading those services. (Joy, p.21, 2001)

As said, the basic facts about the GATS and its rules are all there to be seen in the GATS document itself. Admittedly, though, it does not make for easy reading. However, in regard to libraries, what is important to consider is whether libraries are one of the 'services' that fall under the GATS. Unfortunately, there is not a clear 'yes' or a clear 'no' to this (which is what many people seem to be looking for). For an important legal analysis of the GATS in general, see Krajewski, 2001. Such a situation can lead to accusations that people like me are just scare mongering and that the privatisation (such as it is) that is taking place around us has nothing to do with the GATS. I explore the meaning of 'services' in an article that I wrote for *Managing Information* last December. I noted that when defining the concept of 'services', in the GATS Agreement, in Part 1 Article 1 on 'Scope and Definition' it indicates in point (b) that:

...services includes any service in any sector except services supplied in the exercise of governmental authority.

In point (c) the GATS agreement says that:

... 'a service supplied in the exercise of governmental authority' means any service, which is supplied neither on a commercial basis, nor in competition with one or more service suppliers.

However, the public services are now being encouraged to open themselves up to other service suppliers. Thus, nation states are starting to 'ease the process' – thus, enabling our public services to fall under the GATS.

Interestingly, in a document issued by the Trade Policy Directorate on 7th March 2001, it was noted that:

The GATS excludes from its coverage any services supplied in the exercise of governmental authority. Such services are those “which [are] supplied neither on a commercial basis, nor in competition with one or more service suppliers”. Our interpretation (and that of the WTO Secretariat) is that this excludes public services such as health and education services (although private services would be covered by the GATS)...However, since the terms have not been tested in WTO jurisprudence, some commentators have suggested that the GATS poses a risk to state provision of these services. We do not believe these fears are justified.

Furthermore, Richard Caborn MP, the then Trade Minister, wrote to the *Library Association Record* on 8th March 2001 saying that:

As a major global exporter of services, the UK strongly supports the GATS negotiations and their objective of progressive liberalisation of trade in a fair and predictable way. Despite stories to the contrary, there will be no forced privatisation of libraries or the NHS as a result of the GATS.

It seems unfortunate that the future of our public services is apparently in the hands of the government’s interpretation of what is meant by ‘public services’ and what services the GATS will impact on. Even if there were no examples to date, this would not exclude the possibility of GATS leading to privatisation of public services in the future, if we were merely reliant on legalistic interpretations. Corporate lawyers are likely to interpret the wording in a way that most closely represents their interests. Richard Caborn is right to the extent that *‘there will be no forced privatisation of libraries...’* There will be no GATS Bill or GATS Act in the UK, as such. However, the Regulatory Reform Act of 2001 paves the way and assists with the process of introducing the GATS into the UK. But this misses the point. The GATS paves the way for a marketising agenda. Local authorities are, and will continue to be encouraged to open up their library services to other possible suppliers – indeed, it stipulates in Best Value that they *must* do this (see below). There will be no forced privatisation – people will be persuaded and cajoled – it is ‘creeping privatisation’.

We are all very familiar and well aware of the fact that our public libraries are undergoing significant change. But what conclusions do we draw from this? I am sure that many believe that it will all be for the ultimate good. There is not the time to explore this in any great depth. However, the important point to consider is – what is the driving force/the driving motivation behind this agenda, behind the changes that are taking place in our public libraries? Capitalism is based on aims and drives such as making profits for companies, creating markets, buying and exchanging commodities and money. Our public services, including our public libraries are based on a completely different set of principles. Our public libraries are based on ideas about community, sharing, the public service ethos, the notion of libraries being a ‘public good’ (IFLA, 2001) and human self-expression. As IFLA says, when outlining its position on the WTO Treaty Negotiations:

Libraries are a public good. They are unique social organizations dedicated to providing the broadest range of information and ideas to the public, regardless of age, religion, physical and mental health, social status, race, gender or language. The long-established library traditions of intellectual freedom and equitable access to information and cultural expression form the basis ensuring that library goals are achieved. Libraries of all types form an interrelated network, which serves the citizenry, from the great national, state and research institutions to public and school libraries. The well being of libraries is ensuring access to the full range of human

expression and providing individuals with skills necessary to access and use this content. (IFLA, 2001)

Thus, we have two completely different sets of ideologies here. If the former capitalist-driven ideological base was to make significant inroads into our public libraries (as would be made possible under the GATS), then this would profoundly change the very nature of our public libraries. They would become something completely different. This process has, sadly, already started. I will now seek to demonstrate some of the ways in which this has already started to happen in England

Examples illustrating the *Corporate takeover of libraries* in England – the logic of the GATS coming to fruition in our public libraries in England

(*This section largely consists of extracts taken from my article *The Corporate Takeover of Libraries*, Rikowski, 2001b)

As I illustrate in my article *The corporate takeover of libraries*, (in the ‘Globalisation and Information’ issue) the corporate takeover can be broken down into three main categories – **commercialisation**, **privatisation** and **capitalisation**. There are various examples of the **commercialisation** of our public libraries – and many of us are very familiar with some of them. Income generation is the obvious example. Public libraries have been seeking different ways of generating income for a number of years now. This includes selling items such as postcards, memorabilia, bookmarks, pens and other stationary items. Other materials are also hired out for a fee, such as videos, cassettes and CDs. Income generation was taken up enthusiastically when I was working in public libraries in the London Borough of Newham in the early 1990s.

Another example is where private companies are using libraries to promote themselves and their products. The example here is subtle. Companies cannot, at the moment, just blatantly advertise in libraries, but never the less, they are making inroads. Bill Gates, for example, from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has given £2.6 million to UK public libraries for the creation of ICT learning centres in deprived areas. This is being used to expand the People’s Network, (Resource, 2001). Bill Gates does not need to display big Microsoft posters in these ICT learning centres in order to promote Microsoft. Microsoft and Bill Gates are well known to much of the population already. This will place Bill Gates in a very favourable light – Bill Gates giving money to deprived areas, Bill Gates wanting to help the poor people, Bill Gates wanting to do something about the digital divide – the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in the IT world. Thus, Microsoft, a large business corporation is being promoted in our public libraries. Secondly, in some of our public libraries IT centres are being set up by private companies within the libraries themselves and some are running training courses in IT – they can be allocated a small room within a large central library, for example. There will be no big posters on the door advertising the company, but there will be a small sign outlining who is running the centre. In this way, the company is being advertised. Library users will probably find the centre very beneficial, thus providing the opportunity for the company to expand and develop this at a later date.

Privatisation can be broken down into three main areas – libraries being run directly for profit, private companies making a profit out of running libraries at a lower cost than the price they are contracted to run them and the private sector running capital projects.

The first area is where **private companies are running libraries (or parts of libraries) directly, for profit**. There are some subscription libraries that fall under this category, but they are small in number. There are also company libraries that function to augment the capacity of the firm to make profits (e.g. libraries in law firms) and media libraries that generate revenue (e.g. newspaper libraries). However, what is of particular significance is where corporate capital is moving into public sector libraries and electronic libraries are setting up in competition with mainstream public and academic libraries, operating on a for-profit basis. Examples of this are given below.

There are now IT centres/Internet projects that are being set up in public libraries by private companies. Ormes (1996) describes such projects in some detail. Cybercity is one such Internet project, which was situated in Bath Central Library. A separate area was created in the library, where the public could use the PCs and access the Internet. It proved to be very popular. The council could not afford to run such a project, so a local company called GlobalInternet ran it for profit instead. Ormes notes that:

Cybercity is in fact not a library service at all, but a cybercafe (without the coffee!), which is run for profit by a local company called GlobalInternet. Cybercity, like all cybercafes, offers charged access to the Internet. How it differs from other cybercafes is that instead of being situated in a shop/café it is found in the public library. (Ormes, 1996, p.1)

Another company referred to by Ormes that has been working with public libraries is Input/Output. Ormes described how it had 10 centres in public libraries across the country. Marylebone Library was the first of these. It provided Internet access, but also provided access to software packages, such as word processing and spreadsheets and runs computer-training courses. South Ayrshire council started a South Ayrshire Cyber Project in 1996. The intention was to open a number of Cyber Centres in libraries across the county, providing the public with access to the Internet, software packages and CD-ROMs.

Questia (Fox, 2001), netLibrary and ebrary (Crane, 2001) are all electronic libraries:

...with collections that include tens of thousands of books. And they are growing fast; although modest by the standards of print collections, these commercial digital libraries already dwarf even the largest non-profit collections. (Crane, 2001, p.1)

Questia is an Internet company aimed at serving students in an academic environment, providing online information from books, encyclopaedias and journals in the humanities and social sciences for fees (Fox, 2001). Questia:

...sells information online directly to consumers the way amazon sells books online and the GAP sells clothes online. (Fox, 2001, p.1)

Fox also refers to some other companies that have launched similar products aimed at both students and faculty staff. These are Proquest Academic Edition's Xanadu, and Jones's e-global Library (*ibid.*). Many other examples could be given, but what they indicate is that the private sector is either moving into public sector and academic libraries or setting up alternative operations with the aim of making profits. This is a process that is still at an early stage of development, but it is definitely taking place.

The second form of privatisation is where **private companies make a profit out of running libraries at a lower cost than the price they are contracted to run them**. This has just started to happen in England, in the London Borough of Haringey. The *Library Association Record* (September 2001) reported that:

Consultants have been called in to run a local authority library service. This is a first – although the move is temporary. (LA Record, 2001c, p.515)

Haringey received a very negative report by the Best Value Inspectors and this has resulted in Instant Library Ltd being given the 'opportunity' to turn the Haringey library service round. However, Haringey was one of the first councils to do a Best Value review, and so were 'guinea pigs', in this respect. Some librarians and library workers might think that the main purpose of 'Best Value' is to provide a good library service, serving the needs of the local community and based on the principles of the public service ethos. However, the main purpose of Best Value is to enable the GATS to take effect (see below for further information about Best Value) and to gradually introduce privatisation. It must be emphasised that the process *will* be gradual. Initially, some of the suppliers could be voluntary organisations, trusts and charities (rather than private companies as such), but they can easily change into profit-making enterprises when the time seems right (i.e. when sufficient profits can be made), (see Rikowski, 2001a). The fact that Haringey is being run by 'Instant Library Ltd' eases the process as well, because this company is quite well known in the library world. It is likely that Instant Library Ltd would be preferred to an unknown private company, particularly a foreign one. As the former head of Haringey library service (who retired in 2000) said of Instant Library Ltd:

Some people may be suspicious, but I see it as a positive thing. They seem anxious to work with the staff, and are being very approachable and open. (LA Record, 2001c, p.515)

Thus, by this gentle-gentle approach, capital hopes to make further inroads. Instant Library Ltd is on a 6-months trial, and an assessment will be made on the work undertaken after this period. If 'progress' (in line with Best Value) has been made, then it is highly likely that they will continue to run Haringey libraries. At some point Instant Library Ltd will probably take over Haringey libraries completely. At some more distant point Instant Library Ltd will probably then be taken over themselves by a larger corporation. There we have it – the start of corporations moving into libraries. Am I being cynical? Why then was the local authority in Haringey not given the chance to 'improve' under the Best Value imperative, rather than just allow Instant Library Ltd to move in? The LA Record (2001c) explains how Maria Stephenson, a middle manager in Haringey said that they were not given guidelines on how to undertake Best Value and that they 'didn't have the skills'. They were one of the first authorities to undertake a

Best Value review, so surely they should have been given more help and guidance. Yet, we can speculate why that did not happen: it would not have provided the opportunity for the private sector to start to run our public library services. Furthermore, if no examples materialised from 'Best Value' in this way – providing the opportunity for alternative suppliers, then the Best Value regime itself would be seen to be a waste of time. Best Value would not be being implemented, as intended, if all the Best Value Inspection Reports concluded that all the local authorities were providing a good public library service, or at least, a service that could be improved whilst remaining in the control of the local authority.ⁱ

The third form of privatisation is where the **private sector takes over and runs capital projects**, such as the building of a new central library or a service-wide ICT system. The Private Finance Initiative (PFI) comes under this category, and there are various examples of where PFI has been adopted in libraries. Richard Sibthorpe (2001) describes the first PFI to incorporate construction and IT solutions, which was undertaken in Bournemouth. It provided Bournemouth with a new central library and ICT (information and computer technology) facilities across its whole branch network. A 30-year contract between the Council and Information Resources (Bournemouth) Ltd was signed to build and facility-manage a new central library. Sibthorpe notes in regard to PFI '*The initiatives also provide private investors with valuable exposure to new markets.*' (Sibthorpe, 2001, p.237). Thus, PFI fits in closely with the GATS agenda. Sibthorpe concludes by saying that:

Private Finance Initiatives enable the public sector to effectively purchase a service from the private sector... PFIs look set to be the blueprint for the way in which this, and probably any government, will be aiming to do business with the private sector for the foreseeable future.
(Sibthorpe, 2001, p.237)

It is interesting how Sibthorpe notes the Government's keenness to continue to do business with the private sector in the future, in this respect, and how PFI looks set to be the blueprint.

There are other examples of PFI in libraries. Hackney Technology Learning Centre, which includes a new central library and museum, has used the PFI initiative to build its new library, which is due to open in April 2002, (LA Record, 2001a). Kent County Council is operating a PFI contract for the provision, financing and operation of the council's IT system. This includes the library system and a public information network of over 1000 terminals. Also, Brighton is developing a new central library through PFI (LA Record, 2000c).

The **capitalisation** of libraries and library services is a process that deepens over time with libraries becoming sites for capital accumulation and profit making. The other two processes – commercialisation and privatisation – feed off each other such that libraries and library services become increasingly *commodified* and then capitalised. This implies that library services are increasingly ruled by the goal of profit making. Notions of income generation, income streams, marketing, library products, the user as 'customer' or 'consumer' and the market, competition and cost-effectiveness and efficiency become the

yardsticks for success. This implies a ‘culture change’ regarding the ways library staff are encouraged to view what they are about. The capitalisation of libraries implies its *businessification* – the library and library services as businesses, bathed in business values and outlooks. Continual library reviews provide examples of the way in which this process has been working. The public library service in the London Borough of Newham has undergone two library reviews, for example and the first review resulted in the loss of a large number of professional librarians.

In my article *The corporate takeover of libraries* (Rikowski, 2001b) I also demonstrate how Best Value, Library Standards and the Peoples Network can all be used as mechanisms to help the GATS to take effect. These are the *national faces of the GATS*. This will not be explored in depth here, but a couple of important points will be made. There was a **standard** for qualified staff in the draft document for standards, but this was removed in the final document. Now, services only have to show in their Annual Library Plans that they are employing “appropriate” numbers of qualified staff. In this LA Record news item it says that:

Some will worry that ‘information management’ and ICT are the only qualifications specified. But at least the LA is to commission research to define ‘appropriate’. (LA Record, 2001b, p.131)

Hence, it seems that we are left to play with the word ‘appropriate’, as we were left to play with the word ‘interpretation’ in regard to the meaning of ‘services’ when applied to the GATS (Rikowski, 2001a).

To any professional librarian this would surely seem bizarre: whatever reason can there be for removing professional standards from the document? All becomes clear again, when we refer back to the GATS document, where it becomes evident that professional standards can be seen to be a barrier to trade. This topic is addressed under Article 7 of the GATS on ‘Recognition’ under the ‘General Obligations and Disciplines’ section. In Article 7 (v) it says:

Wherever appropriate, recognition should be based on multilaterally agreed criteria. In appropriate cases Members shall work in co-operation with relevant inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations towards the establishment and adoption of common international standards and criteria for recognition and common international standards for the practice of relevant service trades and professions. (WTO, 1994)

Note that it refers to Members of the WTO setting up “standards”, but does not indicate which members will be involved. Professional bodies are not mentioned here at all, but presumably large corporations will be heavily involved (for they tend to have far greater representation at WTO meetings in general). Where no such international standards exist then existing qualifications could be deemed to be a ‘barrier to trade’ if corporations are denied access to libraries on qualifications grounds. If a foreign supplier took over one of our public library services, for example, and brought staff with them from their own country, these staff might not have the requisite British library qualifications (or their equivalent). Not allowing such staff to work in this particular public library service could be interpreted as a ‘barrier to trade’. As it was pointed out in the *LA Record*, even heads of libraries are concerned about this. It says:

The word is that library chiefs are most concerned by the standard on numbers of professional staff. (LA Record, Aug 2000b, p.426)

In regard to **Best Value** – one of its main aims (indeed, I would argue that it is its **main** aim) is to open up public libraries to different suppliers, thereby creating a market environment and paving the way for the privatisation of our public libraries. Under this scenario, library services would no longer be provided by the local council, for the good of the people in the local community. As Angela Watson says in the *Best Returns* report on Best Value and public libraries:

Government does not believe that it is in the public interest for any single supplier to dominate service provision, either locally or nationally. It is looking for variety in the ways services are delivered, and a mix of service providers from the public, private and voluntary services. The aim is to improve the performance and competitiveness of services, not create a particular model of provision. (Watson, 2001, p.8)

At another part in the *Best Returns* document Watson says:

At present, there may be few or no serious alternative suppliers of library functions. Some authorities appear to see this as a reason for not addressing competition. But library authorities will need to demonstrate that they have seriously considered new approaches and alternative ways of delivering services. As one of the case study authorities remarked; “You just can’t say there isn’t anybody else out there”. Under Best Value retaining library services in-house can only be justified where the authority demonstrates that there really are no other more efficient and effective ways of delivering the quality of service required. Library authorities should explore potential future providers and take steps to encourage them – to create a climate for competition that will enable the market to develop. (Section 5, para. 5.1)

Thus, Watson outlines the overall objective behind Best Value quite clearly. Little more needs to be said, although one particular point is worth highlighting. When referring to ‘alternative suppliers’ this does not necessarily have to mean private companies, in the first instance. I participated in a BBC radio 4 programme last October, *You and Yours*, which discussed the GATS (BBC, 2001) and I spoke about the likely implications of the GATS for libraries. I emphasised my concern that at some point in the future it is likely that private companies will be running some public libraries, will be charging for their services, and that this would have a particularly detrimental effect on the poor and the needy. However, I did not mention the possibility of suppliers other than private companies running libraries. Initially, though this could be a real possibility. Libraries could be owned and run by trusts, charities and other voluntary organisations. Thus, people like me could be accused of scare-mongering. However, when sufficient profits are made and the time is right, these voluntary organisations can easily be turned into private companies. The essential point to note is that a market environment is being created, and that this overrides considerations about the wants and needs of the people in the local community.

Further details about the ‘WTO/GATS Agenda for Libraries’ can be obtained from the *Globalisation and Information* issue. See, in particular, the articles by Fiona Hunt, Anneliese Dodds and myself. All of these articles are available on the ISC website. Canada has also undertaken some interesting and important research on the whole GATS/libraries issue.

Position of IFLA and other library associations in response to the WTO/GATS Agenda

IFLA and various other library associations and library bodies are also very concerned about the WTO/GATS agenda for libraries and how this is likely to shape the future of our libraries. IFLA states its position on the WTO on its website, saying:

There is growing evidence that WTO decisions, directly or indirectly, may adversely affect the operations and future development of library services, especially in not-for-profit institutions (IFLA, 2001).

A little later in the document IFLA refers to the GATS, noting that:

The GATS Agreement has the potential to open up all aspects of a national economy to foreign competition including public sector services such as libraries. Corporations can be set up in any Member State and compete against public services. In such instances, the foreign corporation can challenge support for public sector service and could claim national treatment; i.e. same level of subsidy received from the government by the public sector agency. (IFLA, 2001)

IFLA continues:

With the advent of for profit on-line content providers targeting individual or education services and public libraries, the potential for GATS challenges to traditional library service is increasing. While the concept of allowing “competition” appears benign, the eventual outcome of such challenges will be the undermining of the tax-supported status of public sector libraries at the national, regional and local levels. Without tax support, the library’s role as a democratic institution, making available the widest range of material reflecting the diversity of society, will be compromised. (IFLA, 2001)

The British Columbia Library Association (BCLA) first examined all these issues in depth and informed the library community about them. They have an article on the web with the title:

Imagine a world without libraries – it could happen... (BCLA, und)

Furthermore, the Canadian Library Association (CLA) says that:

Privatization of libraries may result from the proposals for expansion of the GATS Agreement. (CLA, 1999)

and that:

Libraries are unique social organizations dedicated to providing the broadest range of information and ideas to the public regardless of age, religion, social status, race, gender and language. (CLA, 1999)

Other library bodies have expressed similar concerns (see Rikowski, 2001b)

Conclusion

In this paper I provide some basic information about the WTO and the GATS. I then demonstrate, with examples of public libraries in England, how the marketising/ privatisation agenda has already started to take place in our public libraries. This will pave the way, and enable the GATS to take full effect, in due course. Once we fully grasp this reality, we can then seek to do something about it, and endeavour to change the tide. Only then will the general population will be able to continue to enjoy a free public library service that is provided with the wants and needs of the community at the forefront.

¹ I spoke to someone on telephone that was working at Haringey libraries on 29th April 2002. He informed me that Instant Library Ltd first started running Haringey Public Libraries in July 2001, on a 6-month trial basis. This contract was then renewed for a further 6 months. To the best of his knowledge he understands that Instant Library Recruitment will continue to run Haringey Libraries at least until end of 2002.

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For links to readings about the implications of GATS on public libraries throughout the world, see GATS and public libraries website at: <http://libr.org/GATS/>

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Ruth will also be organising a **fringe meeting** at the **International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions conference to be held in Glasgow, in August 2002**. There will be various speakers on the implications of the GATS for both libraries and information. These will include:

Frode Bakken,	President of the Norwegian Library Association
Paul Whitney,	Chief Librarian, Burnaby Public Library, British Columbia, Canada and IFLA representative to the WTO Seattle Ministerial
Dr. Glenn Rikowski	University College Northampton
Anneliese Dodds	Edinburgh University
Ruth Rikowski	South Bank University and member of Information for Social Change

The meeting will be on Thursday, 22nd August, 1-5pm and will be held at:
Glasgow University
Gilmorehill Centre for Theatre, Film & Television
9 University Avenue, Glasgow, G12 8QQ
in Room 408.

For more information about this, please contact Ruth Rikowski.

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