Memory institutions shaping the past, present and future

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Galleries, libraries, archives and museums – the GLAMs – transmit the creativity and experience of the past to the present and the future. As memory institutions they extend from personal archives and local museums and libraries to great collecting institutions like the State Library of New South Wales and its international counterparts.

Much more impressive are the stories embodied in these collections. They include the records in maps, journals and sketches of those who imagined a great southern continent and found and settled it, intruding – often violently – on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who already owned the land and seas. The State Library's collections include items of major importance to Australia's history.

The stories extend to the personal accounts of the colonisers and the colonised, of those who settled the land and those who built the towns and cities, of those who went to war and those who stayed at home. They include the records of government, church and business and the imaginative creations and re-creations of our great writers and artists. Traces of long gone languages

of Australian Aboriginal peoples sit side by side with vibrant works by today's Indigenous writers.

Especially apposite as we commemorate the First World War, is a rich collection of more than 1100 personal diaries of Australians who served in that 'war to end all wars'.

Memory institutions

The State Library and its GLAM peers are aptly considered memory institutions because of that accumulation of cultural capital.

For Hjerppe (1994) memory institutions included "libraries, archives, museums, heritage (monuments and sites) institutions, and aquaria and arboreta, zoological and botanical gardens". He explored the commonalities across the materials collected and described by them and identified the business of memory institutions as holding documents which are interpreted broadly as "something that contains/carries a *text*"[1]. …. : "That which serves to show or prove something; evidence, proof. ... Something written, inscribed, etc., which furnishes evidence or information upon any subject, as a manuscript, title-deed, coin, etc."

This list sits comfortably with an institution like the State Library of New South Wales which combines the roles of gallery, library, archive and museum since it collects *documents* that span the formats commonly identified with each of those types of institution and which include "manuscript, title-deed, coin, etc." In place of emphasising the objects we collect, as does the label 'collecting

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[1] Hjerppe employs surrounding asterisks to show that he is using terms such as 'text' in a generalised sense.

institution', the categorisation 'memory institution' focusses on the content, the *text* of the document.

This conception of memory institutions as institutions to hold and preserve *documents* which carry *texts* which can be *read* embraces the multiplicity of our collections. It can as easily be applied to the paintings and sculptures exhibited in an art gallery as the books and manuscripts in a library. Both can be read by properly trained readers, the first perhaps by a curator with finely honed aesthetic sensibility and a knowledge of art history and the second possibly by a researcher or family historian, each of whom has developed the contextual knowledge to be able to interpret the *text* fully.

The focus on *documents* and *texts* removes us from the reductionist concern with the transmission of information as an assemblage of facts.

Conceptualising our memory institutions as gatherers and transmitters of *documents* refocusses our responsibilities on broader responsibilities than holding and preserving collections or merely transmitting information, something which today is performed ubiquitously and efficiently by an enormous variety of digital tools from websites and databases to portals and apps.

Our readers today have little need to come to our institutions to consult a telephone book, street directory, railway timetable, dictionary, encyclopaedia, newspaper or other reference source, resources which were much valued only a decade ago.

But our communities do need – and increasingly need – the authenticity and authority which we can offer. In the face of the digital tsunami of information,

readers need to be able to discern that which is reliable from that which is doubtful or tendentious.

Libraries are a 'trusted brand'. We convey authority through our collections and our descriptions of the *documents* we collect. That authority guarantees authenticity. Even when we collect a forgery or propaganda we it is a *document* in our collections. Thus, at the State Library of New South Wales, we have recruitment posters from the First World War which are clearly propaganda and must be read as such not as records of fact. They illuminate the attitudes and fears of the time. As *texts* interpreted by our readers, those posters tell of an increasingly war-weary Australia where ever more strident calls were necessary to attract volunteers for a horrifying war on the other side of the world.

Every reader his [or her] *document*

The library philosopher and IFLA advocate Ranganathan famously reminded us in 1931:

1. Books are for use.

2. Every reader his book.

3. Every book its reader.

4. Save the time of the User.

5. The library is a growing organism.

If we substitute *document* for 'book' and 'memory institution' for 'library', Ranganathan's wisdom reminds us in this new century that our institutions must develop organically to respond to the needs of our users who read the

texts in the *documents* we hold and that we hold those *documents* for use*. ….* In short, they convey the memories of our societies – individuals, organisations, states – and, collectively, of humanity.

In that respect we differ from most private collectors whose motivation is generally the Xanadu drive to compile rich – perhaps even comprehensive – collections in their fields of interest. Their purpose is collecting and authenticity and rarity are prized. Our purpose is usage – ie enabling *reading* – and we also prize authenticity.

Our readers discern, interpret and reuse the *texts* in the *documents* we hold and preserve. Robert Darnton, to take one example, has shown us in *The great cat massacre* (1985) how our collections can be applied to understanding history in surprising ways. Three decades Henry Reynolds ago challenged us to rethink Australian history in his *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia* (1982) which drew heavily on libraries and archives including the State Library of New South Wales. Others interpret them imaginatively as Tom Keneally did in his *Schindler's Ark* (1982)[2]. The list of 801 names which inspired the book was typed hurriedly on 18 April 1945, in the closing days of the Second World War and is now in the State Library. … Each of these works have enriched our understanding of our societies by providing new perspectives on the French Revolution, the European colonial invasion of Australia, resistance to the Nazi Holocaust, …. The works demonstrate how the use of our collections can be subversive of orthodoxy.

A society without memory is a society without present and future

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[2] Released in the United States as *Schindler's List*, also the title of the movie adapted and directed by Steven Spielberg.

Through shaping the collections of our memory institutions, which increasingly incorporate found and made digital as well as physical *documents*, and being shaped by our societies and technologies, our institutions enable our societies to know themselves, to interrogate their pasts and presents and to inform their futures. Our institutions are more than repositories of knowledge: they and we are actors in the transmission of knowledge and memory. And that is crucial, as the theme for this satellite conference reminds us "*a society without memory is a society without present and future*".

That theme recalls Santayana's paraphrase of Edmund Burke, which has become a cliché: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Lemony Snicket (2006) made it more pointed for those of us in memory institutions: "Those unable to catalog the past are doomed to repeat it." A joke but a key point: without the work of our institutions to collect, describe and preserve, we would not have the memory, the evidence and proof, to know ourselves, to interrogate our past and present and to inform our future. That perspective informs our policy and practice as we carry forward the collections of the past, collect today's *documents* and prepare to capture those that will appear in multifarious forms in the future.

Libraries with research collections, and especially heritage libraries - the true memory institutions- place their emphasis on building strong evidentiary collections, deep collections of *documents* that carry *texts* to be interpreted by scholars, students, enthusiasts and casual readers.

To offer one example, in 2011 the State Library of New South Wales acquired collection of 745 watercolours from the first decade after the British colonisation of Australia, half of which was totally unknown to scholars. Research by senior curator Louise Anemaat has revealed a hitherto unknown

history, a history that revolutionises the understanding of the first decade of European colonisation in Australia[3]. ... we now know that the early years of the British at Sydney Cove were not only hard for soldiers and convicts as they starved in this strange new land but also a time of wonder in which they made art inspired by the novel plants, animals, fish and especially birds of Australia. The early colony can no longer be seen through the eyes of historians solely as a brutish penal colony, a British Devil's Island, but must also be seen as a capsule of the Enlightenment projected into the world of the Eora[4] in the last decade of the eighteenth century.

That is the power of our collections, both to carry forward memory and to challenge accepted views through providing evidence for analysis and interpretation. The evidence may be newly found or long held and newly examined or seen through a different lens but it is only available because of our work.

It is thus vital that we understand the challenges of preservation and conservation in this digital age. At the State Library of New South Wales we are pursuing the Digital Excellence Program, a decade long initiative through which we are endeavouring to digitise our most valuable, interesting and at risk collections to preserve them and make them more readily available but also to capture and preserve found digital material and be in the position of assuring its future availability. Those imperatives go hand in hand with preserving the physical collections we have inherited in so many formats, many of which are very challenging to preserve.

Conclusion

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[3] Presented in *Artist Colony: Drawing Sydney's Nature*, an exhibition curated by Louise Anemaat at the State Library of New South Wales, 1 Mar 2014 to 11 May 2014.
[4] The Eora are the people of the Sydney coastal basin and consist of 29 clans.

As we carry forward our past collections and shape the collections of today and tomorrow including made and found digital content, we confront new realities and new possibilities. In a time of profound technological social and economic transformation, it is more important than ever that we in society's memory institutions apply our talents in preservation and conservation to the challenges of our times and those of tomorrow.