

## Contexts, connections, access: the glorious possibilities of getting it all wrong

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About a century ago in Web years I wrote a thing about accessing archives on the Web.<sup>1</sup> It is now full of broken links and naive optimism. But a couple of the arguments I made way back then still seem (depressingly) relevant. The first is that we should not wait for the 'BIG SOLUTION'. We should do what we can, when we can, with the tools we have available. And learn. Always learn. The second is that the Web offers new contexts and connections. Not just new ways of finding archives, but new ways of seeing them. And that prospect is just as exciting as it was a hundred Web years ago.

It may seem odd that the manager of a major discovery service should be warning against the dangerous allure of the 'BIG SOLUTION'. After all, Trove currently offers access to almost 400 million resources – and that certainly is BIG.<sup>2</sup> But Trove is also evolving, opportunistic and open. It does not do everything, but it has made an important start.

Over the last few years, Trove has been moving beyond its bibliographic roots and focusing on bringing together unique Australian material from libraries, archives, museums, universities, historical societies... just about anywhere. The point is simply to make this content easier to find, and not just in Trove itself. Every day we work with organisations large and small, advising them on ways to expose their metadata. And what works for Trove will work for other aggregators or discovery services. It is not about trying to funnel everything and everyone through a single portal, it is about taking advantage of the tools we have to build something useful together. Now.

Trove is not the 'BIG SOLUTION', it is an ongoing series of collaborations and experiments. It is not just a portal, it is a platform for others to build on. It might not provide the ultimate archival discovery system, but it will certainly help get people to your website. And along the way we will all learn a little more about what 'access' really means.

Similarly, I think context is a word that must be allowed to escape and evolve. Huddled in fear against the 'loss of context', we too often imagine that opening archives to online discovery is a process of debasement and distraction. We too often assume that authentic experiences can only take place within the controlled framework of our descriptive systems, not amidst the noise and clamour of the broader Web.

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People make connections; we are really good at it. And people make connections with our stuff online. They share and they comment, they bookmark and they link. Some of these connections may be shallow and ephemeral, but others are full of meaning, power and emotion. These connections themselves become new pathways for discovery, new resources for understanding beyond the narrow confines of provenance.

People also do bad things. They mislead and misinterpret. They always have. But while trolls might proliferate and ‘amazing pics’ might spread without attribution or explanation, the Web offers its own remedy – us. For example, @PicPedant on Twitter critically scrutinises the ‘amazing pics’ genre, routinely debunking their claims. Those who mislead will be confronted by those who correct, and in the process all will hone their critical faculties. We will learn.

But do archives trust their online users to know what is good for them, to do the right thing and to recognise the limits of their own knowledge? Or do they think users need to be protected, guided and controlled by the archival equivalent of helicopter parents – hovering nearby to ward off the looming threat of decontextualisation? By exposing our collections to re-use (and sometimes misuse), I think we will encourage our users to develop their own critical literacies, their own interpretative resilience.

And really, if we are so worried about a loss of context, why not make it easier for people to cite our stuff? Persistent URLs, anyone? (Drink!)

Once we overcome the fear, we can explore the possibilities. In my own tinkering with data from cultural collections, I often play around with ideas of randomness and serendipity. I enjoy the challenge of trying to expose the unexpected, to subvert the power of ‘relevance’ in discovery interfaces. Once we give up the idea that there is a right way to navigate our collections, we can try out all the wrong ways and see where we end up.

By bringing together millions of books, articles, archives, objects, images and more, from across hundreds of organisations, Trove itself helps to broaden our notions of context and bring unexpected connections to the surface. But perhaps it is the public who supply most of the serendipity, just by using our resources in ways we could never predict. I love to be surprised by the passions and obsessions of our community and how they are expressed online. It is not always comfortable, but it is always an opportunity to learn. And that is important.

So we should just keep doing stuff, making things and taking opportunities without worrying too much about how it all fits into some grand plan for archival access. We need reasons for acting, not excuses for waiting. ‘Rethinking’ for me is a continuous, reflective process informed by experimentation and observation. We do. We learn. We think.

The point of all this should not be to end up where we predicted, but somewhere else completely. And we should always relish the opportunity to be surprised.

## **Endnotes**

1. Tim Sherratt, ‘Pathways to Memory: Accessing Archives on the WWW’, presented at the AusWeb Conference, Gold Coast, 1996, available at <<http://discontents.com.au/pathways-to-memory/>>, accessed 10 March 2014.
2. See <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/>> and <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/general/about>>, accessed 10 March 2014.