ARTICLE

Documenting Australian Society: Progress Report on an Initiative of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee

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Abstract

The topic of Documenting Australian Society has been something of an occasional perennial on ASA Conference programs since the 1990s. Archives and manuscripts published a theme issue on it in 2001. In December 2018, the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Program organised a national summit on the topic in Canberra. That summit meeting endorsed 'The Canberra Declaration' as an action agenda for the documentary heritage sectors and agreed that the UNESCO Memory of the World Program should continue to take carriage of the initiative. Since then, a steering committee has been established, and two seminars/webinars have been organised: the first on Documenting COVID-19 in Australia and the second on Documenting the Experiences of Australian on Welfare. This paper discusses the background and objectives of the initiative, its current status and plans for the future.

Keywords: *Documentation strategy*; *Archival silences*; *National coordination*; *Appraisal*; *UNESCO*.

At present in Australia, documentary heritage[1] holdings are built with limited self-awareness of the greater whole. Decisions about what material should be preserved long-term can be reactive and uncoordinated. What are the consequences of this lack of coordination? What picture does the total stock of Australian documentary heritage present? How representative is it in terms of our rich, distinctive and diverse historical experiences, our changing population, localities and multiple national narratives? Are we making the best use of the limited resources that Australia devotes to the cause of preserving and providing access to documentary memory? Australia needs an agreed, transparent and defensible process for making hard decisions about what to make and keep.

A vast quantity of documentation is created and destroyed every year in Australia. With the advent of digital technologies, the world now creates more data every year than it has the physical capacity to store and keep. Only a tiny sliver of this vastness is able to preserve for

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use by future generations. We accept that only a tiny sliver is worth the effort and expense of preserving. But what documentation needs to be included in this sliver? Are there wasteful overlaps and concentrations? Are there gaps and silences? Are we keeping the right stuff? Are there time periods, issues, communities, minorities and phenomena which urgently need targeted documentation strategies? Are there important aspects of life in Australia for which adequate documentation is not created in the first place and which need to be proactively documented before all memory of those activities disappears forever? In short, what documentation does Australia really need to make and keep to enable current and future generations to understand, explain, debate and account for our national collective experiences?

The work of documenting society is carried out by a wide range of organisations, institutions and initiatives that are committed to enabling the long-term preservation of and access to Australia's documentary heritage – or the documentary component of our national estate. To pursue a nationally coordinated approach to our documentation mission, we need to, in the words of David Bearman, 'focus our appraisal methods on selecting what should be documented rather than what documentation should be kept'.[2] In the words of Richard Cox, we need to identify the most 'salient and important features of contemporary institutions and society'[3] and work collectively to ensure that adequate documentary evidence of these features is captured and preserved by archives.

The aim is to achieve better planning and coordination of distributed efforts to preserve and provide access to a representative corpus of documentary heritage materials to help current and future generations understand, debate and interrogate the nature of human experiences in Australia. In an environment of shrinking overall funding for documentary heritage programs, it is more important than ever for practitioners nationwide to be seen to be working together to ensure that we spend our limited budgets in ways that help deliver the best possible collective outcomes for preserving and providing access to a documentary heritage estate.

From time to time, Royal Commissions into significant issues, scandals and injustices in Australian life such as the 'stolen generations', institutional responses to child sexual abuse and forced child migration have highlighted gaps in the available documentation. This in turn has mobilised resources and collaborative action to fill these gaps through initiatives such as oral history and indexing projects. Whilst these efforts have inevitably been somewhat piecemeal, they do show what can be done when there is a collective recognition of the need to do a better job of documenting Australian society.

The question of what aspects of human experience are under-represented or 'silenced' in archival holdings is one that has exercised the minds of archivists for generations. Although it is not a new question, it is one that continues to resonate in our discourse, as is demonstrated by recent attention that has been given to the question of silences in the archive.[4]

What are the diverse and non-mainstream aspects of life in this country that are going under-documented? Where might such documentation be made and kept and by whom? The 'by whom' question is just as critical, if not more critical, than the 'what to keep' question. We should not assume it should just be done by 'us', on 'our' terms. Those groups whose experiences have been neglected, ignored or under-represented in our efforts to date may or may not appreciate being belatedly patronised by established programs and institutions. Our responsibility, I would argue, is not to invite the under-represented into our spaces and establishments – but rather to be willing (and to be seen to be willing) to be invited into the spaces and networks of these other groups to provide some advice, assistance, moral support and resources.

Before delving into the pre-history of the initiative, it is necessary to define its scope. It is primarily focused on decisions regarding what documentary heritage needs to be identified for long-term preservation. Other essential activities such as description of and access to those

heritage materials are out of scope. As important as description and access regimes may be, decisions about what to keep and what not to keep are absolutely fundamental to the success or failure of our collective efforts. Decisions (either conscious or unconscious) to not preserve documentation represent the ultimate denial of access to that documentation.

Dealing with the issue in Australia, 1956–2016

Long-time attendees at Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) Conferences will be very aware that the challenge of documenting Australian society has been a topic of professional discussion for many years. In the 1950s, Harold White of the National Library of Australia was arguing to the Paton Inquiry that the main aim of libraries and archives was to build a systematic record of national life and development.[5] This philosophy was echoed by Canadian Dominion Archivist W. Kaye Lamb in 1973 when he visited Australia to investigate and report on future directions for the then Commonwealth Archives Office. The vision of there being a coordinated national archival system resembled the holistic 'total archives' philosophy that prevailed (and still prevails) in Canada and was enshrined in Australian law with the passage of the *Archives Act* in 1983. Sadly, a combination of under-resourcing and passive opposition to the idea has meant that those provisions of the *Archives Act* have rarely been a priority for the National Archives of Australia, which has usually defined its role as beginning and ending with Commonwealth records. Documentation initiatives were left to others such as the Business Archives Council, the Australian Science Archives Project, the Australian Women's Archives Project and the National Library's Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts (RAAM). Each of these separate initiatives was highly commendable in their own right but was left to live or die based on the heroic efforts of particular groups and individuals, being isolated initiatives pursued in the absence of any national system of support or mechanism for agreeing and addressing gaps and priorities.

The phrase 'documentation strategy' entered the archival lexicon courtesy of Helen Samuels, who wrote about it in an article called 'Who Controls the Past?' in *The American Archivist* in 1986. Samuels defined a documentation strategy as 'a plan formulated to assure the documentation of an ongoing issue, activity, or geographic area (e.g. the operation of the government of the state of New York, labor unions in the United States, the impact of technology on the environment)'.[6] In Australia, the possibility of implementing a nationally coordinated documentation strategy was aired in 1992 at the cross-disciplinary national summit 'Towards Federation 2001', convened by Deputy National Librarian, Eric Wainwright. Another National Library staffer, Manuscript Librarian Graeme Powell, took up the challenge in an article in *Archives and Manuscripts* in 1996. Powell surveyed the state of our documentary estate, as recorded in the then *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts*, which had been collated and published for many years by the National Library. He found a preponderance of personal papers of creative writers, academics, pastoralists and businessmen. Correspondingly, he found many notable absences. Notwithstanding the trade union holdings of the Noel Butlin Archives and University of Melbourne Archives, where were the papers of shearers, waterside workers, nurses, factory workers, Aboriginal activists, housewives and European immigrants?[7]

In 1997, I gave a paper at the ASA's annual conference titled 'From Here to Eternity: Collecting Archives and the Need for National Documentation Strategy'.[8] In 1999, Michael Piggott took up the cause in a paper delivered to the National Scholarly Communications Forum Round Table on Archives in the National Research Infrastructure titled 'A National Approach to Archival Appraisal and Collecting'. In turn, Piggott's paper inspired Maggie Shapley in 2001 to edit a theme issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* focused on the issue of documenting Australian Society. This issue included articles by Kirsten Thorpe on Indigenous records; Sigrid McCausland on documenting protest movements; Don Boadle on documenting rural and regional Australia; Marie-Louise Ayres on 20th Century literary archives; and Richard

Cashman on sports archives. In the same year, Sue McKemmish wrote that there was 'no coherent, collaborative, nationally coordinated, encompassing fourth dimension collection policy framework for the whole of Australian society'.[9]

After that, the issue faded into the background of our discourse until Michael Piggott again picked up the cudgel in his valedictory keynote address on the absence of an Australian archival system to the 2008 ASA annual conference in Perth. In this paper, Piggott proposed four rules for any such system:

1. Be inclusive
2. Form the machinery
3. Develop a documentation plan
4. Know what you stand for.[10]

Once again, the issue slow burned for a few years, is re-emerging as a hot topic for discussion at three successive ASA annual conferences between 2013 and 2015, and led particularly by Sigrid McCausland, Kim Eberhard, Colleen McEwen and Maggie Shapley. In the midst of that, I once again weighed into the fray with an article in *Archives and Manuscripts* that revisited my 1997 ASA Conference paper.[11] All of this chatter was very interesting, but it did not really lead anywhere. There seemed to be consensus that a national documentation strategy would be a nice thing to have, but no one was able to advance the idea in any concrete manner. Sigrid McCausland was plotting with Michael Piggott at Tilley's wine bar in Lyneham, Canberra, about how to get things moving. At the time, I was a near neighbour of Sigrid's – both of us living in the Brisbane suburb of Annerley. When she was diagnosed with her terminal illness in 2016, we had some intense discussions about how to make sure the idea got some real legs. I made a deathbed promise to her that it would not die with her, and that I would do all I could to get something happening. I moved back to Canberra and resumed the plotting with Michael Piggott at Tilley's wine bar. Mindful of his second rule from his valedictory keynote, we agreed that the only current avenue for forming some machinery was the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Program. With its national, pan-disciplinary focus on preserving documentary heritage, Memory of the World was the nearest equivalent to the long defunct Collections Council of Australia as a possible suitable sponsor for an initiative to progress efforts at documenting Australian society. We approached the Memory of the World Committee proposing a national summit to explore whether key stakeholders were genuinely interested in the idea or not. The Committee agreed enthusiastically to our proposal, and so we set about planning a summit gathering in Canberra in December 2018. David Fricker, of the National Archives of Australia, generously agreed to sponsor the event.

The 2018 Summit and 'Canberra Declaration'
The invitation-only Summit featured two invited overseas speakers – Laura Millar from Canada and Mark Crookston from New Zealand – the aim being to let delegates hear about similar efforts in two other societies with similar histories of indigenous first nations and British/multicultural settler societies. A range of local speakers including archivists, librarians, curators, historians and social commentators filled out the program.

The aim of the event was to test the appetite of key players for pursuing a more coordinated approach to building a distributed Australian documentary heritage estate that is as representative as possible of the full diversity and complexity of life in Australia. We were quite prepared for the possibility that the answer to our question might be, 'no thanks – not that interested' or perhaps 'nice idea, but it is unrealistic and we have better things to do with our limited resources'. If so, we would have walked away telling ourselves, 'well, we had to try – but now we know the idea won't fly'.

But that did not happen. In fact, the summit delegates endorsed the idea and passed a 'Canberra Declaration' committing themselves and/or their organisations to work collaboratively to pursue a representative national estate of documentary heritage. The first five points of the declaration are all motherhood statements. They summarise the issue and explain why it matters. The remaining points are all action items. These points can be summarised as follows:

1. Identify key issues, communities, groups and partners to involve in further discussions
2. Pursue collaborative research into strengths, gaps and weaknesses of existing national holdings + models and strategies for improving those holdings
3. Engage with governments about policies and funding for improved planning and coordination
4. The NAA (National Archives of Australia); NLA (National Library of Australia); NFSA (National Film and Sound Archive) and AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) to pursue joint and inclusive leadership for a national system for documentary heritage preservation
5. Develop a collaborative plan of action.

Progress since the Summit

Since the Summit, a small group of summit organisers and delegates, together with some Memory of the World Committee members and others, have been active in discussing the initiative with range of interested organisations and academic researchers. Initially, we decided that our most pressing need was to initiate some rigorous research to give us a more informed understanding of the current state of documentary heritage preservation in Australia. This research could explore potential evidence sources and frameworks for identifying gaps in holdings and ways of prioritising the documentation of important but neglected or under-represented aspects of life in Australia. We felt that we needed a solid evidence base to inform the planning and coordination of efforts and that research (in addition to inclusive community participation and consultation) is needed to build and test this evidence base.

We have had many useful and detailed discussions with a wide variety of academics across Australia from a variety of subject disciplines. All expressed interest in and support for the initiative, and many very good ideas and suggestions have been forthcoming. These discussions are continuing but are yet to bear fruit in any viable research funding proposal to the Australian Research Council.

At the suggestion of Memory of the World Committee member Rachel Watson, we agreed to broaden the focus of the Documenting Australian Society Initiative to place more emphasis on fostering grassroots, community-led documentation efforts. Rachel proposed a self-selecting 'communities of practice' model – a 'bottom up' approach to documenting society that could complement and enrich the more 'top down', planned and coordinated approaches pursued by peak bodies and national documentation frameworks. An excellent example of such a community of practice is one coordinated by AusStage that is documenting the performing arts in Australia. This is a great model for other potential engagements with grassroots practitioners, including Community Heritage Grants recipients.

In 2020, we established a steering committee to guide the initiative into the future and which will report to the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee. The steering committee, whose initial focus is on pursuing the action items from the Canberra Declaration, consists of members of the parent Committee, in addition to representatives from the Australian Society of Archivists (position currently vacant following the departure of Leisa Gibbons), Kirsten Thorpe (representing Indigenous perspectives) and key national collecting institutions named in the Canberra Declaration. In future, we hope to broaden the membership of the

steering committee by including representatives from GLAM Peak, the Australian Library and Information Association, NSLA (National and State Libraries Australia) and individuals who can represent grassroots community heritage practitioners and users.

Also in 2020, with the support of the National Archives, we organised a webinar on the highly topical issue of Documenting COVID-19 in Australia. This event featured: Commonwealth Chief Health Officer Dr Brendan Murphy; pandemic historian Anthea Hyslop; freelance curator Lauren Carroll Harris; Scott Stephens from the ABC; Jaye Weatherburn from the Digital Preservation Coalition; digital humanities and media academics from ANU and the Queensland University of Technology; and speakers from different national collecting institutions. A video of this event can be viewed on YouTube.

In 2022, we commenced a strategic planning process facilitated by Shane Breynard. One outcome of that process has been agreement on Vision and Mission statements:

Vision
Nationwide holdings of documentary heritage that are inclusive and representative of the wide diversity of Australian experience and endeavours, past and present.

Mission
To enable this vision, we will foster an ecosystem of research, planning and coordination that supports documentary heritage programs, practitioners and communities of practice, and that engages broadly across Australian society.

In late 2022, we are organised another webinar/seminar over the road at the National Archives of Australia, that is co-sponsored by the ASA and the National Archives. This free event has the title 'Honouring the stories of struggle: Reassessing Australian records of disadvantage'. The event will have two sessions: one asking the question 'What evidence should be preserved?' and the other asking the question 'What evidence is being preserved?'. The first session will feature care leaver Dr Frank Golding; Robyn Sutherland from Uniting Communities; genealogist Danielle Lautrec and UTS social policy academics Eva Cox and Professor Nareen Young – the latter speaking on Indigenous perspectives. The second session will feature speakers from the National Archives of Australia, National Library of New Zealand and Jenny Jerome from Tasmania, in addition to Cassie Findlay talking about privacy issues.

Other models
Australia is not the only country that has the challenge of selecting and preserving a representative body of documentary heritage as a systematic and inclusive record of national life and experiences. I have already mentioned Canada and New Zealand as sources of inspiration for our efforts. New Zealand is a particular inspiration for our work. There is, in New Zealand, explicit acknowledgement that they have a thing called a 'national documentary heritage system'. Their National Library, Archives New Zealand, Te Papa and their film and sound archive work together to exercise leadership and provide support for this system and its associated 'Preserving the Nation's Memory' work program, called Tahuhu. Senior positions have been created in these institutions with responsibility for the liaison, coordination and strategic relationship management that the program includes. The relevant Minister requires all budget bids to demonstrate how they impact on and relate to the documentary heritage system. As an example of this system at work, there is the 'We are the Beneficiaries' project led out of the National Library of New Zealand. This project is run on the principles of co-design involving representatives of the welfare beneficiary groups and individuals in New Zealand whose

stories and experiences the project aims to document. I am delighted that Jessica Moran from New Zealand will be speaking about this project at our seminar on Friday.

In the United States, there is a brilliant initiative called 'Documenting the Now'. This project is funded by the Mellon Foundation and Princeton University Library and governed by the Shift Collective, which aims to achieve 'equity by design'. It develops open-source tools and community-centred practices that support the ethical collection and use and preservation of publicly available content shared on web and social media. Documenting the Now responds to the public's use of social media for chronicling historically significant events as well as demand from scholars, students, archivists and others, seeking a user-friendly means of collecting and preserving this type of digital content.[12]

Future steps?

The Documenting Australian Society steering committee will continue reaching out to new partners and stakeholder in an effort to broaden our reach and sustain our efforts. We will keep a close watch on similar initiatives in other countries and will seek to emulate good models and initiatives. With the new Government in Canberra developing a new national cultural policy, we hope that there will be a space in this policy for the kind of coordination of efforts and outcomes that is our vision for documentary heritage in Australia. Funding for the initiative is an ongoing challenge, given that the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Program has no reliable source of income. We are most grateful, therefore, for the sponsorship of the ASA and the National Archives for events such as Friday's seminar – for otherwise, there would be very little that we could accomplish.

We will never achieve a state of perfection – or documentary heritage nirvana – regardless of how well we cooperate and regardless of how clear and compelling our vision might be. We will always have gaps and inconsistencies, not the least because of the inevitability of funding shortfalls, political complexities and the irreconcilability of contestable and contingent perspectives and world views across our domains. Indeed, it is the nature of this complex and contingent beast that I think we will and should always be constructively dissatisfied with the results of our collective efforts. Continuous improvement will always be necessary.

But just because we might never achieve perfection does not mean we are not all obliged morally and professionally to work together as well as we can to do the best job we possibly can do given all of the constraints and realities mentioned earlier. It would be unfair for future generations to condemn us for trying but failing to achieve perfection. But future generations would be absolutely entitled to condemn us if we don't even try to do something about the challenge or, worse, pretend that the problem does not exist.

Collectively, there is a need to develop and operationalise frameworks and mechanisms that can help guide the making of hard choices and agreeing and allocating responsibilities. These frameworks and mechanisms need to be evidence-based, defensible, coherent, realistic, inclusive, holistic, contestable, transparent and capable of evolving. The work needs to be informed by a thorough understanding of the current state of Australian documentary heritage holdings – its strengths, weaknesses, gaps and overlaps. Our baseline, if you like. More importantly, and more far more challenging, it needs to be informed by knowledge of and some level of agreement on what is important and distinctive about the diversity and complexity of life in Australia that has to be reflected in our documentary heritage in order to help current and future generations interrogate and understand Australian society. Our responsibility is to ensure that important aspects of Australian life are not neglected as a result of well-meaning but disjointed, fragmented and ad hoc efforts pursued in the absence of a holistic regime

that provides support and resources to diverse, community-driven documentary preservation programs.

The objectives of the initiative are ambitious, if not audacious. It will not be easy to make progress. We must avoid the temptation to try to 'boil the ocean' but rather make progress in small and incremental steps. But if something is important, the fact that it may be difficult is no reason not to attempt to advance the issue, and that we would stand to be condemned if we do not try our best to achieve success. Gallant failure is preferable to a lack of action, or indeed a lack of acknowledgement of the importance of the issue.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, the author uses the definition of 'documentary heritage' that has been adopted by the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme. See UNESCO, General Guidelines of the Memory of the World (MoW) Programme, Paris, 2021, p. 2, available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378405?posInSet=25&queryId=f3fa4032-9934-4376-a95b-720fae659c27 accessed 23 September 2023.
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12. See: http://www.docnow.io/