



## REFLECTION ARTICLE

# School Archives and the Visibility of Heritage via #throwbackthursday

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### Abstract

The purpose of this reflection piece is to discuss the visibility of heritage and the use of #throwbackthursday for school archivists and their collections. Social media is a valuable space for school archivists to share the wonders found in their archival collections. It is a way to connect with and provide positive engagement for the wider school community, providing connectivity, creating a collective memory and sharing intergenerational stories. In addition, this reflection piece provides first-person insight into how school archivists engage in #throwbackthursday, and why it is important to provide visibility for school archivists and their archival collections.

**Keywords:** *School archives; #throwbackthursday; Visibility of heritage; Storytelling; Personal narratives; Educational history; Social media*

Visibility of heritage for school archives is an enticing reason to enter the social media landscape.<sup>1</sup> Social media provides an accessible forum for archives to interact with the public and engage their interest for nostalgia and memory, and this interest can be utilised by school archives interacting via #throwbackthursday or #flashbackfriday.<sup>2</sup> Visibility for school archives provides access to a ready-made audience whose focus, whilst primarily centred around interacting with their school, can translate into a secondary interest in that school's history.

Archives are a valuable commodity, containing intrinsic information which uniquely identifies an organisation. For schools, archives contain a wealth of information with much of the collection photographic and perfectly suited to the image-based social media landscape. School archivists are the gatekeepers to their school's social, cultural and educational history who innately understand how to contextualise these photographs to underpin and promote visibility of this history.

Whilst each school's history is uniquely individual, the overarching core focus is the same: education. Within this crowded educational landscape, the question to be asked is: how do

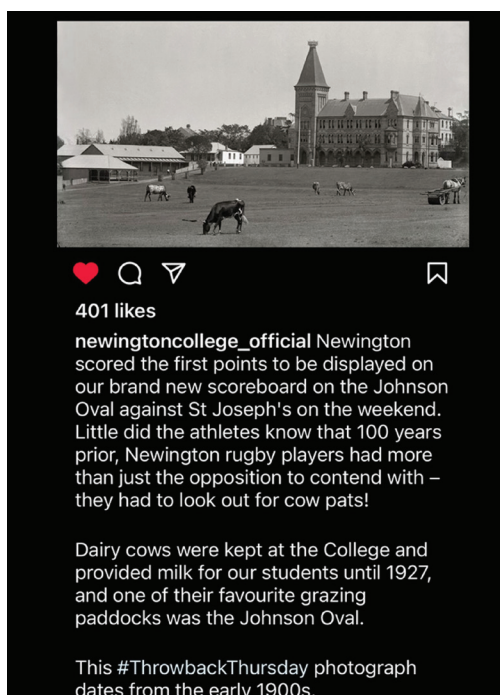
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schools position themselves to stand-out in such a crowded online space and shape the public's response to the school?

For most school archivists, there will be a regular request to contribute to their school's social media platforms. Whilst there are different and emergent ways for organisations to utilise social media as a 'fun learning tool', it is also a space perfectly positioned for engagement and connection.<sup>3</sup> As well as being a learning tool, social media can also promote in the 'shared act of collective memory' via #throwbackthursday.<sup>4</sup> If, as Steve Jobs once shared, 'the most powerful person in the world is the storyteller', then currently, the storyteller's power lies in the crafting of the perfect social media post.<sup>5</sup>

School archivists are using their storytelling platform to share images from the past to touch on collective memory and be framed within those well-crafted #throwbackthursday social connection posts. Whilst #throwbackthursday may appear overused or under-appreciated, most school archivists will use these labels to invite ease of access for informing and increasing visibility of their school's heritage. Such labels are an access point for eliciting 'fondness for a past event', where an individual bonds privately with a collective shared experience and find themselves part of a larger community in a shared space.<sup>6</sup> The truth is that 'schools are a constant in an ever-changing world', and archival images and #throwbackthursday social media posts can foster a strong and solid connection to the past.<sup>7</sup>

To interrogate the #throwbackthursday label is to attempt to understand why there is such a desire to connect so intimately with a shared past. For the school archivist, the appeal lies in communication of their school's history, and photographs enable easily accessible posts to be shared with an ever-growing and ever-changing community. For the social media user within that community, it provides an access point into an institution which plays a large part in their lives but whose history is often an unknown. Art historian Mar Gaitán posits that



**Figure 1.** Newington College grounds early 1900s, screenshot, newingtoncollege\_official instagram, Newington College archives.

social media not only allows the dissemination of history and memory but can also ‘break the distance that may exist between the user and, in this case, the school.’<sup>8</sup> Just like that ‘illusory barrier’ of the fourth wall in theatre, social media – especially a feelgood archival post – can traverse with ease a perceived divide between schools and the wider community.<sup>9</sup>

The construct of social media should neither lessen the quality of the school’s history nor the storytelling. #throwbackthursday is a vehicle for evoking nostalgia, promoting belonging, a collective identity and a sense of security that the school has both a long history and an archival collection, which is under the care of a professional archivist.<sup>10</sup> Whilst the theory underpins the value of social media, how do school archivists practice it in the everyday?

With the popularity of these #throwbackthursday posts, we can position our archives and our unique collections by harnessing memory and focussing on significant events, for instance, ANZAC Day, a commemorative day where people already possess a personal relationship with and express an ‘intense historical connection’.<sup>11</sup> Such national days can legitimately position the archives front and centre in the social media of the school’s official accounts, where school archivists can enhance the significance of our photographs and stories with an event, which already resonates with an audience. Historian Marianne Hirsch calls this resonance a ‘sense of living connection’, where access to intergenerational memory can attach to an event and translate into a sense of belonging within a community.<sup>12</sup> This connects current students with students past, presenting their history as relatable and providing connectivity and access to their own historical consciousness and institutional memory, not merely an exercise in nostalgia.<sup>13</sup>

Current events are another logical way to interact with the school community, creating a connection which strengthens a sense of longevity and importance as well as identification with the ‘group collective identity’.<sup>14</sup> This melding between community memory and cultural history can work for a school, for example, where I used the occasion of a state election to share the narrative of a past student who had held that same high office being voted on. Another example of utilising current events for the school archivist was the death of a celebrity, a touch of fame via a school visit years past repositioned as a backdrop of connection with public grief. Such events might not be a logical link aligning with a particular school, yet these posts can attract alternative audiences interacting with our school’s social media account. This creates a link in the chain of memory, which aids with ‘group and community identity’ and alters the perception of what might be part of a school’s archival collection.<sup>15</sup>

School events are another access point for a #throwbackthursday post. These are school-specific events, perhaps a fair, sporting day or significant school birthday milestone. It is the perfect space to further embed that chain of memory and promote intergenerational engagement. One recent way I have used this was by celebrating a past student’s milestone 100<sup>th</sup> birthday with a series of photographs for #throwbackthursday. Contextualising their lifelong engagement with the school, this social media post brought together generations and created an unexpected community joined in celebration, with multiple comments, re-posting and sharing which increased exposure.

For the school archivist, without the boundary of current or school events, the all-encompassing brief of #throwbackthursday can be quite a daunting prospect, as our archival collections overflow with opportunity and choice. These briefs may come from communications teams or alumni managers eager to exploit the cultural memory of the archives. How do I manage this all-encompassing brief? I tend to settle on images which capture the heart and soul of the school, or I focus on a recent donation to the archives, which highlights our collection and underscores the dynamism of school archives.

In my experience, there appear to be four major social media topic areas, which resonate with the community: positive profiles on incredible students, sporting achievements, anything featuring our youngest students and archival stories. All these topics enable the social media user to share in the school’s achievements whilst also providing a glimpse into the past. Social



**Figure 2.** Stall assistants at the 1930 Newington College Great Wyvern Fete, screenshot, newingtoncollege\_official instagram, Newington College archives.

media unexpectedly performs the function of recording our past, providing memory for those who have either forgotten or are newly engaging with a school's history.<sup>16</sup> This idea of social media as memory offers up images providing a connection to the past, as photographs, and therefore the social media posts themselves, become 'instruments for collective cultural memory'.<sup>17</sup> With this emerging era of artificial intelligence and deepfake images, it is comforting for the social media user to have confidence in the veracity of the images posted as the collective cultural memory sits inside the truth of a school archive.<sup>18</sup> The implications of this are, of course, much larger than school archives and our collections, but it does highlight how our school's images can play a part in underpinning memory and how we respond to it.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst #throwbackthursday does revolve around memory via the use of images, this social media landscape also provides a useful space to share potted histories of the school. Most school archivists are adept at writing longer articles for their various school magazines, which provide an access point for a deep dive into the school's history, perhaps via a feature profile or celebration of a building or school event. #throwbackthursday provides an entry point for a short history crafted around a particular image. I use this as an opportunity to share my knowledge, presenting interesting images alongside a précis of the history of the events. This underpins another role we as school archivists play, that of creating a narrative, educating and forming meaningful and positive engagement. #throwbackthursday offers access to official school memory, invites belonging to community, and provides positive social interaction and context for current events whilst enabling contact with the broader school community in an informal, yet official, setting. Social media users can comment, engage, re-post and share – at its core, these posts provide community and connection, which further embeds positive engagement with the school.

Is all engagement positive, or is there a downside to these feelgood #throwbackthursday posts? A school cannot always keep looking back. Whilst all schools have interesting histories,



**Figure 3.** Newington College memorial drive, 1955, screenshot, newingtoncollege-official instagram posted on Remembrance Day 2022, Newington College archives.

ranging in age from recently opened schools to those that have passed their sesquicentenaries, schools need to show progress and show how they are looking forward whilst creating community and memories by looking back. Archival social media posts show this sense of progress through heightening a sense of belonging and providing connection to those who have left so they can continue their engagement with the school. Parents can feel a sense of community in a school, which can perhaps at times be isolating, and these positive good feelings carry into the future, perhaps through new enrolments, bequests, donations or just enhancing goodwill throughout the community. These are not the primary objectives of the role of the school archivist, yet we are, nonetheless, ambassadors for our schools and partly responsible for engendering goodwill whilst gently guiding the history of the school into the future.

Historian Anna Clark tells us that ‘history shapes our consciousness’, and social media enables us to shape that of our schools, whilst showcasing our collections, individuating us from our educational peers and embedding history and memory for the future.<sup>20</sup> Visibility of heritage is important for school archivists, as we hold a unique position where whilst our collections are not the school’s core focus, we provide an easy path for connection. We should not fear befriending social media: writing our stories and fulfilling those requests for a #throw-backthursday post all adds to sharing the wonder found in our school archival collections.

### Notes on contributor

*Julie Daly* is the college archivist at Newington College, a Uniting Church school in Sydney which was founded in 1863. Julie is a professional archivist who has worked in archives across corporate, non-profit, museum and educational sectors. She is enthusiastic about bringing history to life and is passionate about sharing stories from her collections. As a life-long learner, in 2022, she completed a Graduate Diploma in Local, Family and Applied History at the University of New England, which deepened her passion for social, cultural, educational and Australian history.



## Notes

1. The school archives being discussed are those in Australian independent schools, which employ school archivists and run archival programs. All first-person accounts relate to my own experience after having worked in school archives for over 20 years.
2. For ease of reading, #throwbackthursday will be used throughout this reflection piece but refers equally to #flashbackfriday; Betsy Hearne, 'Leaving a Trail: Personal Papers and Public Archives', *Archivaria: The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists*, vol. 86, Fall 2018, p. 70, available at <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13644/15045>, accessed 4 October 2023.
3. Danielle Salomon, 'Moving on from Facebook: Using Instagram to Connect with Undergraduates and Engage in Teaching and Learning', *College and Research Libraries News*, vol. 74, no. 8, September 2013, p. 410, available at <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/8991/9770>, accessed 24 August 2023. For school archives, social media is a useful learning tool for sharing the school's history.
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5. Dave Byrne, 'Steve Jobs' Lesson about Storytelling', 31 July 2020, available at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/steve-jobs-lesson-storytelling-dave-byrne/>, accessed 24 August 2023.
6. Helmsing and Whitlock, p. 38.
7. Melina Marchetta, *Tell the Truth, Shame the Devil*, Viking Australia, Melbourne, 2016, p. 283. This novel has as its central themes loss, tragedy and community, a community enhanced by collective grieving via social media.
8. Mar Gaitán, 'Cultural Heritage and Social Media', *E-dialogos: Annual Digital Journal on Research in Conservation and Cultural Heritage*, no. 4, December 2014, p. 41, available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340900068\\_Cultural\\_Heritage\\_and\\_Social\\_Media](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340900068_Cultural_Heritage_and_Social_Media), accessed 28 September 2023.
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10. Veyssel Apaydin, 'Introduction: Why Cultural Memory and Heritage?' in Veyssel Apaydin (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage: Construction, Transformation and Destruction*, UCL Press, London, 2020, p. 1.
11. Anna Clark, 'The Place of Anzac in Australian Historical Consciousness', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2017, p. 21. doi: 10.1080/1031461X.2016.1250790. While Anzac Day has a specific geographic reach and cultural context, the idea of any national or commemorative event can be imagined.
12. Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1, Spring 2008, p. 111. doi: 10.1215/03335372-2007-019.
13. Clark, p. 23.
14. Apaydin, p. 3.
15. *ibid.*, p. 4.
16. Roberta Bartoletti, 'Memory and Social Media: New Forms of Remembering and Forgetting', in B. Pirani (ed.), *Learning from Memory: Body, Memory and Technology in a Globalizing World*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, UK, 2011, p. 85, available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259531789>, accessed 29 September 2023.
17. David Bate, 'The Memory of Photography', *Photographies*, vol. 3, no. 2, September 2010, p. 245. doi: 10.1080/17540763.2010.499609.
18. Alan Trachtenberg, 'Through a Glass, Darkly: Photography and Cultural Memory', *Social Research*, vol. 75, no. 1, 2008, p. 113, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40972054>, accessed 4 October 2023.
19. Bartoletti, p. 91.
20. Timothy Michael Rowse, 'Distance, Dispassion and the Remaking of Australian History', *The Conversation*, 21 March 2022, available at <https://theconversation.com/distance-dispassion-and-the-remaking-of-australian-history-177552>, accessed 4 October 2023.