Documenting Australian Society: An initiative of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee

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Abstract

The topic of documenting Australian Society has been discussed regularly by Australian documentary heritage professionals since the 1990s. The journal Archives and Manuscripts has published theme issues on the topic in 2001 and in 2023. In 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 Australian Memory of the World Program should take carriage of the initiative. Since then, a steering committee has been established and three seminars/webinars have been organised. The first seminar was on Documenting Covid-19 in Australia, the second on Documenting the Experiences of Australian on Welfare and the third on reinventing archival appraisal practices. This paper discusses the background and objectives of the initiative, examples of similar initiatives in other countries, the current status of the initiative and plans for the future.

Keywords

Document Selection, Under-documentation, Australia, 'The Canberra Declaration'

Defining the problem

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 Australia's rich, distinctive and diverse historical experiences, its changing population, localities and multiple national narratives? Is Australia making the best use of the limited resources that are devoted 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 documentation 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 be preserved for 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 isn't 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 Australia's national estate. Australia is blessed with a strong network of national and state archives and libraries, all of which are publicly funded and enabled by governing legislation that confers a range of functions and powers on each institution. For example, each of the nine government archives at national, state and territory levels have legislation giving the archives the power to determine how long public records must be retained and which ones should be designated as worthy of ongoing archival preservation. National and state libraries have legal deposit legislation for publications that have recently been extended to cover electronic publications. The work of these national and state institutions is expanded by a range of documentary preservation programs within universities, local museums and libraries and community-based documentary preservation programs such as indigenous keeping places and immigrant community archives. With all of this activity it is clear that there is no shortage of commitment to the documentation of Australian society in a wide range of settings, though there is of course often a shortage of funding and skilled staff to sustain these various documentation programs. What is also lacking are the mechanisms to ensure the planning and coordination of these various initiatives to ensure that the totality of these efforts are delivering a representative and comprehensive documentary memory for the benefit of current and future generations.

To pursue a nationally coordinated approach to the documentation mission practitioners 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' (Bearman, 1989, pp. 14-15). In the words of Richard Cox, we need to identify the most 'salient and important features of contemporary institutions and society' (Cox, 1994, p.24) 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 [indigenous] 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. While 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 documentary holdings is one that has exercised the minds of archivists and librarians 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 (Moss and Thomas, 2021; Hegarty, 2022, pp. 31-46).

What are the diverse and non-mainstream aspects of life in this country that are 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 – by professionally trained archivists and librarians working in national and state institutions. 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. 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 for this article. 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 represents the ultimate denial of access to that documentation.

Dealing with the issue in Australia, 1956-2016

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 argued that the main aim of libraries and archives was to build a systematic record of national life and development (Piggott, 1990, pp. 214-215). 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 of Australia's Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts (RAAM). Each of these separate initiatives were highly commendable in their own right, but were left to live or die based on the heroic efforts of particular groups and individuals. They were isolated initiatives largely 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, 1986, pp. 109-124). 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)'. 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, 1996, pp. 62-77). Powell surveyed the state of Australia's 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 at the Australian National University and University of Melbourne Archives, where were the papers of shearers, waterside workers, nurses, factory workers, Aboriginal activists, housewives and European immigrants?

In 1997 the author gave a paper at the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) annual conference titled 'From Here to Eternity: Collecting Archives and the Need for a National Documentation Strategy' (Cunningham, 1998, pp. 32-45). 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' (McKemmish, 2001, p. 351).

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 (Piggott, 2008, pp. 201-202):

1. Be inclusive

2. Form the machinery

3. Develop a documentation plan

4. Know what you stand for.

Once again, the issue slow-burned for a few years, re-emerging as a hot topic for discussion at three successive ASA annual conferences between 2013 and 2015, led particularly by Sigrid McCausland, Kim Eberhard, Colleen McEwen and Maggie Shapley. In the midst of that, the author once again weighed into the fray with an article in *Archives and Manuscripts* that revisited the 1997 ASA Conference paper (Cunningham, 2014, pp. 165-170). 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 plotted with Michael Piggott in 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 Sigrid was diagnosed with a terminal illness in 2016, the two of us had some intense discussions about how to make sure the idea could be made reality. I made a deathbed promise to Sigrid that the idea would not die with her and that I would do all I could to get something happening. Mindful of his second rule from Michael Piggott's valedictory keynote, he and I 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 identifying and 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. An approach was made to 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 the proposal and convened a summit meeting 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 countries 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, NLA, NFSA and AIATSIS to pursue joint and inclusive leadership for a national system for documentary heritage preservation; and
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 a 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 (Fewster, 2023, pp. 29-31). This is a great model for other potential engagements with grassroots practitioners, including Community Heritage Grants recipients.

In 2020 a steering committee was established to guide the initiative, reporting 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, the Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities, Kirsten Thorpe and Monica Galassi (representing Indigenous perspectives) and key national collecting institutions named in the Canberra Declaration. In future, it is intended to broaden the membership of the steering committee by including representatives from other peak bodies, in addition to individuals who can represent grassroots community heritage practitioners and users.

Also in 2020, with the support of the National Archives of Australia, we organised a webinar on the highly topical issue of Documenting Covid-19 in Australia. This event featured the Federal Government's Chief Health Officer, a pandemic historian, a freelance curator, a radio journalist from the national broadcasting corporation, a representative from the Digital Preservation Coalition, digital humanities and media academics, and speakers from different national collecting institutions. A video of this event can be viewed on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4P0qzmdc7O12qcSaDBb77MAwknY6eeMt).

In late 2022, we are organised another webinar/seminar at the National Archives of Australia, that was co-sponsored by the ASA and the National Archives. This free event was titled 'Honouring the stories of struggle: Reassessing Australian records of disadvantage'. The event had 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 featured a care leaver, the CEO of a key welfare organization, a genealogist and social policy academics, one of whom addressed Indigenous perspectives. The second session featured speakers from the National and State Archives in Australia and New Zealand and a privacy expert.

In September 2023 we ran a seminar as part of the ASA Conference in Melbourne titled 'How can we rethink our appraisal practices?' This featured presentations and interactive panel discussions involving archivists, an indigenous researcher, the CEO of a moving image museum and a nationally prominent author and journalist.

Some of the papers presented at our three seminars have been published in a theme issue of

the journal *Archives and Manuscripts* (vol. 51, No. 1, 2023) titled 'Documenting Australian Society Redux'. Other presentations from the first two seminars, together with other information on the Documenting Australian Society initiative can be found on the website of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Program at: https://amw.org.au/node/111

Strategic direction

In 2022 we commenced a strategic planning process. 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 endeavors, 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.

The Strategic Plan includes five high-level goals and articulates a range of constraints that need to be recognised in our nationwide documentation endeavours.

1. A National Documentation Strategy agreed by key industry and professional stakeholders and endorsed by governments.
2. An agreed, evidence-based framework (developed through research, dialogue and contestation) for mapping Australia's diverse documentary heritage needs and documentation gaps/silences.
3. Effective coordination of collection/acquisition/appraisal planning and activity spanning Australia's entire ecosystem of documentary heritage programs and initiatives.
4. Support for diverse communities in their efforts to document aspects of Australian society, especially those of First Nations peoples. These efforts will assist self-determination in community-led documentation programs.
5. Inclusive, active, ongoing discussion and improved community awareness of the need to continuously improve the documentation of Australian society for the benefit of current and future generations.

CONSTRAINTS

- Funding for documentary heritage preservation will always be limited and must be spent wisely.
- Massive volumes of documentation are created every year in Australia, but only a tiny percentage of the totality can and should be preserved for the use of future generations.

- Deciding what to keep and what not to keep involves making hard decisions.
- The hard decisions made by documentary heritage programs and practitioners should be made with and by the wider Australian community, particularly underrepresented communities. These decisions must be defensible, transparent, consultative, evidence-based and made with reference to the wider body of Australia's distributed holdings of documentary heritage materials.
- The UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Program has no source of regular funding. Therefore, any progress made on this strategic plan will rely on in-kind support from individuals, institutions and peak bodies.

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. Canada and New Zealand have already been mentioned 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, national museum 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.

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, 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.[2] Social media content is of course a key source of documentation of societal phenomena and attitudes. Selecting and preserving social media content is, however, challenging not just in terms of the sheer volume of content that is created but equally in terms of the ethical issues associated with content owners' privacy, consent and control. 'Documenting the Now' helps archivists and librarians to navigate this complexity by

creating ethical standards and tools for the collection and preservation of significant social media content.

'Documenting the Now' was developed in response to the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. Social media played a vital role in the groundswell of community outrage and political response to the killing. Everyone agreed that this content needed to be captured and preserved, but tools and strategies for achieving this were largely non-existent. According to Ed Summers, the aim was first 'to develop an open-source Web app called DocNow that will allow researchers and archivists to easily collect, analyze and preserve Twitter messages and the Web resources they reference. The second [aim] is to cultivate a much-needed conversation between scholars, archivists, journalists and human rights activists around the effective and ethical use of social media content.' (Summers, 2016)

Future steps?

The Documenting Australian Society steering committee will continue reaching out to new partners and stakeholders 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 national government having developed a new national cultural policy called 'Revive', we hope that there will be 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 Australian Society of Archivists and the National Archives of Australia for events such as our seminars – 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 notwithstanding 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 we possibly can do, given all of the constraints and realities mentioned above. 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 do not 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 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.

Author

Adrian Cunningham has worked in a variety of roles in government archives and research libraries from 1981 to 2017. Since then, he has continued to be professionally active on a range of committees and as a part time consultant. He has been a member of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee since its inception in 2000. He is a Fellow of both the Australian Society of Archivists and the International Council on Archives.

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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. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378405?posInSet=25&queryId=f3fa4032-9934-4376-a95b-720fae659c27

2   See: http://www.docnow.io/