

Designing the Archives 2019

Held in Adelaide, Australia, 21-25 October

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Two and a half years ago I was extremely fortunate to have been the recipient of the ARANZ scholarship to attend the combined ICA/ASA / ARANZ/PARBICA conference in Adelaide. I was so excited and, after securing the additional funding required from the school I work for, was off on an amazing adventure – an entire week in a city I had never been to before and totally on my own.

Monday was all about SIGs and I attended the school archives SIG with a diverse group. I was the only international attendee and upon arrival felt a bit awkward. However, it was not long before I felt welcomed into the fold and listened to some very interesting discussions around some of the very things that I see come up for NZ school archivists: space, electronic born material, membership rules of professional bodies and how they are applied, and the use of social media.

The day was hosted at Prince Alfred College (PAC) where we were taken on a tour. I came away with serious space envy – they have a museum plus their archive areas for storage. A few of us managed a peek at the library as well and that is another impressive space. After learning that PAC Archives have their own Instagram account, I got all inspired and when I bounced back into work, I asked our Director of Communications if St Margaret's College (SMC) Archives could have their own social media accounts, the short answer was "No! There are too many departmental social media accounts as it is".

The last session of the day was all about a piece of SAAS called SchoolBench. This is software designed to manage school photos and uses facial recognition to identify people in the photos and tag them accordingly. The developers of this software are adding in archival features so that a school archive can use the software to manage historical content, even the material that is not a photo. It is quite labour intensive to add exemplars for all students so photos uploaded can get appropriately tagged and then there is the double checking required as sometimes there are mistakes. Here is a link to the SchoolBench website <https://www.schoolbench.com.au/features/archive/>

The welcome reception was held at the Art Gallery of South Australia which had just opened the 2019 Tarnanthi exhibition, a magnificent display of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. The setting was a lovely way to start the conference in earnest, I even caught up with some of the people I had met during the day at the school archives SIG.

The venue for the conference was the Adelaide Oval, home of sporting fixtures and conferences, just a few minutes' walk from my accommodation. At all sessions during the conference the people of Kaurna were acknowledged and thanked as the indigenous people of Adelaide. There were four plenary sessions on the opening day with two sessions of your own choice. The plenary sessions covered the user-centred-ness of the conference and why that is so important to the future of archives and how they operate. Identifying who accesses, visits, and why that is important for archivists to think about.

Ancestry, the major sponsor of the conference, had Senior Director Quinton Atkinson present (his presentation starts at minute 36:03 of the video) to address the attendees about how Ancestry can assist an archive to keep and make available information about past generations and what their lives were like at a fixed moment in time. The very poignant video of the son of a Holocaust survivor coming across a list of women that his mother had kept from her time at Auschwitz and the research he was doing to find out what had happened to the women on that list humanised the impact that archives can have on lives (AusArchivists - TV, 2020).

The two sessions I chose for the afternoon were "Making archives accessible through innovation, redesign and digital initiatives" and "User-centred design thinking as a driver for innovation". The first of these sessions had three speakers from the national archives of Fiji, United Kingdom, and Korea who each told of their archive's journey into the public eye and the change in perception of the general public of what a national archive can mean to them.

Fiji did this by becoming more visible with outreach programs, garnering trust within the community by partnering up with like-minded, and respected, organisations. Slowly the wider community is coming to see that their national archives are relevant to everyone (Balenaivalu, 2019).

The UK took a slightly different route and used publicity and inclusive outreach programs that encouraged people to become involved in archives. By changing the way the UK National Archive looked at themselves, they changed the way they were looked at by the community they serve. Korea took a more educational approach to get people involved at all levels of archiving with a strong emphasis on the youth of the country being involved (James, 2019).

Wednesday was another scorching day and the air conditioning was pure bliss after a short walk to the Oval. An interactive workshop kicked the day off and this was very much the start of a new awareness for me as I have worked in one archive and that is a school archive where the content is fairly vanilla with very few records or items that could upset or traumatise someone, but that is not the case for all archives. I had never before considered how a description of a record might affect the end user, be they a researcher looking into atrocities committed during any of the many conflicts e.g. WW2 holocaust records, or an individual who has been in the foster care system for part, or all, of their life who wants to see their records which may contain disturbing images or reports. The big questions about these records are: how do you put warnings on records that may disturb some people but not others? How do you describe records so that even the description does not cause additional trauma?

In the first plenary session of the day, Professor Elizabeth Sheperd from University College London, provided more food for thought on the how and why records are kept, in this instance focussing on the records of care-experienced people accessing their records after they leave care. The way records have been written can, and does, impact on the care leaver. When they view their records and there are pages completely redacted or only a sentence about why they have been returned from a placement, feelings of rejection can resurface. The dehumanising aspect of reading records that are about them, but do not include their voice in any way can conflict with their memory of that time or situation (Shepherd, 2019).

I think my eyes may have leaked during this session as it became extremely clear that there are generations of people that have experienced the harsh bureaucratic processes of record keeping and have lost chunks of their lives and identity as a result. The four recommendations on how records should be created and managed to promote human-centred recordkeeping are profound. It would be interesting to undertake the same research in New Zealand to determine how closely the experience here matches the UK.

Prof. Marek Kowalkiewicz took us into the next plenary session with a great discussion on archivists remaining relevant by understanding the future of record keeping and the shift to the digitalising of processes and how that impacts on the findability of information and not just from those inside your organisation. This is not the same as the digitisation of previously analogue information which is a different beast entirely, but it is the combination of the two that will give us digital businesses (Kowalkiewicz, 2019).

The rest of the day was made up of optional sessions which for me included “ICA Congress and conferences: Path to new partnerships” and “Digitisation strategies” the first of which was ICA young professionals sharing their experiences of conferences and congresses.

Digitisation strategies had three speakers with Inga Bolstad, Director of the National Archives of Norway, a country only 300,000 people bigger than New Zealand, leading the way. I’ve added that little statistic because the vision of the National Archives of Norway is for “Global access to all of Norway’s historical data” (Bolstad, 2019, p. 11). Can New Zealand follow Norway’s lead in providing one platform for all sectors that want to share their historical data?

The remaining two speakers spoke on how their organisations were handling various digitisation programs, detailing the challenges, the experiences, and the results.

The last session for the day started with China’s push to manage the use of electronic records under big data circumstances was an interesting peek into the challenges of information management in China and creating a digital environment for everyone to access and use.

Brenda Gunn took us through the differences between reading something on paper vs reading something on a screen. How our memories behave differently with these different formats and how the immediate environment can be altered to maximise the workers and users of spaces in archives. Being aware of the users of space and the images displayed, e.g. not displaying images of people that have committed crimes against the ancestors of people undertaking research in that space. Gunn concluded with some steps to take to make spaces contemplative with practices, instruction and check-ins (Gunn, 2019).

A group of people from the Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV) discussed their integrated web platform and how their records have changed and how this in turn affects researchers. The new model with an enhanced description results from more flexibility in describing, assigning more labels, and permits any level of description. This is just the start of how things have been changing at PROV, there have been challenges, but the overall result is a better research experience for the end user. This session was the end of the presentations for the day, but not the end of events as the conference dinner was that night. Held at The Ellington, the former Adelaide Electric Tramways Club, we had a wonderful dinner with fantastic company and music. There was a 1919 or black, white, blue or green theme to reflect the rebranding of States Records’, who were celebrating being 100 years old, that most people well and truly participated in.

Thursday dawned bright and hot and we were off and racing through the final day of conference. The first plenary session for the day “Honouring Indigenous Voices and Relationship – Indigenized Archival Praxis,” presented by Camille Callison - an Indigenous librarian, archivist, academic, and cultural activist who is a member of the Tsesk’iya Clan of the Tāltān First Nation, British Columbia, Canada. This was a very thoughtful look at indigenous knowledge and the impact of how that knowledge is held and the role that colonialism and de-colonialism plays in the understanding of the needs of the people that knowledge belongs to. This is definitely an area that I would like to understand more.

Peter Lester from the University of Leicester discussed the benefits and rationale behind user-centred design. There was an emphasis on both the physical environment design and the way all staff interact with the people coming into the archival space and for the staff to give the visitors the tools to fully engage with the archives. This presentation was followed by Odile Welfele, Chargée de la coopération archivistique internationale aux archives de France and as my French is non-existent, I went on a wonderful pictorial journey viewing archive buildings from around Europe that have seen extensive change and modernisation that is user focussed (It help that the slides were in English!)

Session 1.8 had three separate presentations by a total of five people all talking about recent initiatives that involved making archives more accessible to everyone, not just researchers, but anyone that wants to know about their history, or society as it was or even just see what is in an archive. From digital archiving to shaking up the archives by changing the way the organisation thinks about things to how machines impact our lives, this was an inspirational session that left me thinking about how I could shake up my wee archive!

Then we were into the final plenary session of the conference, the closing ceremony along with the ICA Section of Professionals (SPA) Film Awards with the winners from twelve nominated films were announced. But wait, there is more ..

On Friday I attended the Designing the user-centred digital archive workshop at The Armoury - South Australian Museum. This was a full-on day of very interactive tasks and exchanging of ideas that was motivational and inspiring. It was the first time that I had ever created a user profile. I used a typical student and thought about the things held in our archive that they may be interested in and how I could empower them to find relevant materials.

This was an amazing opportunity, thank you ARANZ for the scholarship that precipitated this great journey. I learned a lot, and absorbed just some of the passion that was evident on everyone's faces as they spoke, demonstrated, and presented to equally passionate audiences. This conference gave me the confidence to continue building a database for St Margaret's College which is now available to all staff of the college to view, explore, and request material if they wish.

Endnotes

AusArchivists - TV. (2020, January 6). Designing the Archive—P1 Opening Ceremony and P2 Michelle Caswell Keynote Address 22 October 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JGOEfzO2ec>

Balenaivalu, T. (2019, October 22). Designing how Pacific archives are perceived; using empathy and experimentation to make archives more "relevant" in a resource poor environment [Conference]. Designing the Archive 2019, Adelaide, Australia. <https://www.archivists.org.au/documents/item/1593>

Bolstad, I. (2019, October 23). Re-designing the National Archives of Norway. Designing the Archive 2019, Adelaide, Australia. <https://www.archivists.org.au/conference/program-and-abstracts/abstracts#Wednesday>

Gunn, B. S. (2019, October 23). Using Contemplative Methods to Facilitate Deeper Thinking Modes [Conference]. Designing the Archive 2019, Adelaide, Australia. <https://www.archivists.org.au/conference/2019-international-conference>

James, J. (2019, October 22). Creating Archives for Everyone. Designing the Archive 2019, Adelaide, Australia. <https://www.archivists.org.au/documents/item/1594>

Kowalkiewicz, M. (2019, October 23). Our Digital Future [Conference]. Designing the Archive 2019, Adelaide, Australia. <https://www.archivists.org.au/documents/item/1564>

Shepherd, E. (2019, October 23). 'Untangling myself from the file': Human-centred recordkeeping [Conference]. Designing the Archive 2019, Adelaide, Australia. <https://www.archivists.org.au/documents/item/1563>