

Telling Our Own Stories: Maintaining collective memory in a world of distributed records

Belinda Battley

This paper is based on a presentation I gave at the ARANZ conference held at Auckland University in September 2015. It seemed to me a very suitable venue for the presentation, because it relates to a research project I am working on together with the Auckland University Tramping Club community and the archival community to try to find a way to help maintain the records which help maintain the club's collective memory, in a time when those records are becoming increasingly scattered between a whole range of different formats, locations and agencies. Eric Ketelaar¹ noted that a common past is what gives continuity, cohesion and coherence to a community, and the records which support a community's collective memory are a vital part of maintaining links with that common past.

This photograph shows a tramping party from Auckland University



AUTC tramping party, Wilkin Valley, c.1985. *Photographer: Andrew Poole (author's collection).*

Tramping Club, or AUTC, in the Wilkin Valley in the 1980s. Thanks to the magic of photography, careful physical storage, photo scanners, digital image storage, and digital image editing software, I can show you evidence of this trip I took up the Wilkin today, nearly 30 years later. This Tramping Club, which my family has belonged to for three generations, has been around more than 80 years. The Tramping Club is just one of a myriad of communities with records that are central to maintaining their collective memories.

Margaret Hedstrom defined collective memory as “a group’s representation of its past in terms of shared origins, values, and experiences. Collective memory is distinct from individual memory because of the emphasis on common representations of past events or experiences, some of which occurred long before the lifetime [or the community membership] of any living member”.² Each community, of course, has its own unique knowledge, values and culture, which are worth preserving – not just for the survival of the community, but because it makes the world that much richer. As for so many communities today, many of these records are distributed widely, kept and described by organisations with little or no knowledge of the culture of the club – not only archives and libraries, but also Facebook, cloud email services, Flickr, Twitter, and so on. The records are created and kept in all kinds of formats, digital and physical, tangible and intangible. The double challenge is to ensure that these records are preserved and also that the community’s own interpretations of them are maintained so their unique stories and culture are kept alive. To do this, communities need to become participants in the archival process.

Background to the Research

We and our records live in a complex, interconnected world. Records of communities are scattered between a wide range of custodians and formats, digital and physical, and according to the needs and perspectives of the organisations that are keeping them.³ As Schwartz and Cook noted in their much-cited 2002 paper, archives need to “acquire and reflect multiple voices, and not, by default, only the voices of the powerful”.⁴ Perhaps it is time we take that brave step towards what Huvila called a “radical user orientation.”⁵ Ketelaar⁶ notes that records have the power to be instruments of empowerment and liberation as well as instruments of authority and control. He avers that those who are subjects of records, “actors in the semantic genealogy of the record”, need to have their power as co-creators “recognised as much as the power of creators and

keepers.” Gilliland argues that archivists need to “move beyond the custodial and institutional mind-set that has dominated the field for centuries and instead embrace a network orientation.”⁷

We need a transformation in archival practice and theory to deal with this realignment of power, and the increasingly digital and distributed records of communities’ collective memories. This calls for a fundamental change, a new paradigm of inclusive, participatory archival description, allowing for multiple interpretations and the virtual linking of widely distributed records.⁸ I’m working together with the Tramping Club and archival experts to examine this problem in more detail, and work on a possible solution.



Distributed records of the AUTC. Photo: RS on roof of Minchin Biv, Arthur’s Pass National Park, mid-1980s. *Photographer: Peter Jenkins.*

This image, which shows the locations of some of the records of the AUTC, gives just one example of widely-distributed records: the club has an ongoing problem managing the records of its collective memory.

Defining 'Community'

Most simply, of course, a community is a group of people with certain attitudes, values, or interests in common – but the communities involved in this study have more in common than this. The AUTC is a social club, but it is also a “community of practice” – described by Wenger⁹ as “groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” – and this is

also true for the other two communities involved in this research, the archival academic community and the archival practice community. At the same time, each of the communities is what Eric Ketelaar¹⁰ described as a “community of memory” – “a given group recognises itself through its memory of a common past.” And Jeannette Bastian argues¹¹ “Records, both oral and written, become both the creators as well as the products of the societal memory of a community.”

So, it's a multiple community, multiple archive, and multiple-format world, with distributed archives. And in this particular research, I am a member of all of these three communities, so I am taking an insider's perspective to help me understand and interpret what's going on.

Distributed Records

What's wrong with distributed records? Potentially, nothing at all – it could be a very useful model, if you know where they are, are confident of their preservation – and can access and use them within your own contexts of meaning. Distributed records could be compared with the idea of a distributed memory.

Wegner¹² described a “transactive memory system” as one which “consists of the knowledge stored in each individual's memory combined with “meta-memory” containing information regarding the different teammates' domain of expertise”. Sharing the work of memory makes a lot of sense when there is a lot to be remembered. And this model could also work for sharing the work of maintaining records, if done consciously and with an effective plan. This type of distributed memory system, where different people are responsible for different parts, already exists in the club – it's how the club manages to deal with all the different tasks that need to be done. There's a committee member responsible for trips, for safety, for the hut, for all kinds of different tasks... They look after their particular areas and get together regularly to keep each other up to date, and if anyone needs to know something, then someone can point them to the right person to ask.

It seems the club has been maintaining its collective memory pretty successfully up to now, and a large part of that has been through maintaining relationships between people. Records stored in people's houses are still available to the club, as long as the person who has them still has a relationship with current members. But with each generation it gets harder to keep up all the connections and maintain the links, so we need to find a way to work within the club structure to find a solution to this problem, which as we have seen is part of a wider problem being

faced by archival practice and research.

The club has become aware that a more conscious effort to preserve the records of its collective memory is needed. At the same time, digital technologies provide new opportunities for sharing club records and memories with members scattered all over the world. So this research relates both to a problem and an opportunity.

Research Questions

So to address the problem, we need to find a solution that will work for everyone involved: and to do this, we need to really understand what is going on, and then explore the implications of any possible solutions. And the first thing is to try to establish how this community uses records in constructing, maintaining and sharing its collective memory. So at the moment, I am working together with the Tramping Club community on the first research question: How does this community use records in constructing, maintaining and sharing its collective memory?

Then, using the combined knowledge and skills of archival experts and practitioners, we'll be looking at some of the concepts behind a model of description which allows for multiple, parallel provenance, which we know in New Zealand as the Australian Series System. The plan is to refine a model of Series System concepts as they are understood today, through discussions and by looking at the literature and some working examples of descriptive systems. The question to be answered in this part of the research is: how are Australian Series System concepts defined by 21st century archival practitioners and theorists?

Finally, we'll be investigating how well these two sets of concepts fit together, to see how well the concepts behind the series system can be used to design an archival system to meet the community's needs, as we have identified them. Of course, it will be important to have the archivists who are already looking after some of the records of the tramping club in the discussion, as they are an essential part of the equation. The parts of the research questions, which we hope to answer in this part, are how do Australian Series System concepts meet community archiving needs? And do they? How can (or can?) this model of archival description help a community construct its own worlds of meaning? And how can a community take control of its own records of collective memory?

Mediated Community Partnership Research

This research is seen from a different point of view from each of the communities involved. Each has its own needs, and its own values. Each

community also has its own skills and knowledge to add to the solution which makes for a very rich resource to work with, much richer than if they were working individually.¹³ It's really important that the final result is suitable for all of the participants, so we all need to work in partnership to define the research problem, contribute to the research design, and benefit from the outcomes. I'm an insider in all of these communities, which means I can mediate between the different perspectives and needs of the different groups, and make sure they are involved in the aspects of the research that are relevant to their knowledge and interests.

With community partnership, communication, reflection and negotiation are key to success,¹⁴ so my role as mediator is to make sure these keep happening all through the process. And I also have to be transparent about my own part in the research process, because of course I am bringing my own point of view to the research. I am blogging about the entire process as it happens, so it will be clear how my decisions and conclusions have been reached, and what the influences have been as they happen.

And finally, but importantly, as a member of all of these communities I am aware that at times there will be conflicts in values and ethics: When there is a conflict, I'll try to work together with the communities to find a solution, but if it can't be resolved, I will favour the community with the least power in this situation, which is the tramping club. There's a lovely phrase, "Friendship as method" which is really central to this research project. An ethnographer called Lisa Tillman-Healy¹⁵ said "Researching with the practices of friendship means that although we employ traditional forms of data gathering, our primary procedures are those we use to build and sustain friendship: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability".

Developing the Model with the Tramping Club

To develop the model of the community's use of records to maintain collective memory, we've been having semi-structured interviews and discussions. That sounds very formal, but in reality they involve conversations in cafes, pot luck dinners and going to someone's house for a cup of tea. I've found the most effective way of having these conversations is in the kinds of environments where we would normally meet, because that way you get a much quicker rapport, the conversation flows readily and memories and ideas are triggered by association. I record and transcribe these conversations, analysing as I go, and at the same time I'm seeking out the records as people mention them, wherever

and whatever they are – and as I go, I’m sharing a blog of what’s happening with my supervisors and other people in the archival research field who are interested, all the while gradually building up the model. From the interviews and discussions, themes and concepts are starting to emerge, and I’m feeding these back to the Tramping Club community to clarify and confirm them – this is a technique known as building a Grounded Theory. Once the model is a bit more developed, I will go back to the community in a more formal way to discuss and clarify it.

So, the members of this club are all university educated, they’re computer literate, they deal with data, information and records every day. So you might assume that their recordkeeping followed the recognised western tradition, and also was pretty organised? Or maybe not. A few months back, I discovered where many of the official paper club records for the last 50 years have been stored for a while: in a pile of boxes in someone’s garage. He is a life member who has been looking after them until a better place can be found. They’re not listed, just sorted into rough categories, and when I looked in the boxes it was obvious a lot of them hadn’t been looked at for years. They don’t look like something that is seen as particularly central to the day-to-day maintenance of the club’s collective memory. I’m not saying they aren’t valued, just that if the club memory is surviving as well as it clearly has been for the past 80 or more years, there must be something else going on too. You might point out that these aren’t current records – but many of the current written records seem equally disorganised, in traditional recordkeeping terms. And yet the club manages to keep functioning effectively.

Some of the Club’s records are held in Special Collections at the University of Auckland Library,¹⁶ and the members of the Club I’ve spoken to about this are happy about it, because they appreciate the skills that professional archivists have in maintaining physical records, and there was a lot of support amongst them for asking if we could transfer more of the records, such as the ones in the garage, to the same place. I did discover though that very few club members were aware that they are here, so we might need to think about increasing the club’s links with these records.

Some records relating to club activities can be found at Archives NZ. Just looking at the entry in Archway for the hut books from Great Barrier Island¹⁷ reminds me of some fantastic after-exam tramps I did in the 1980s... Again, most club members weren’t aware that these records are there, until I told them, so clearly this isn’t how the club’s collective memory is being kept alive at the moment.

A lot of club members and former members have their own individual records. They are starting to pluralise and re-create the records online, and passing on elements of club culture in Facebook for example – someone from the '70s shared a photo and reignited a memory of an evening of music at the club hut. A current member said they wished they had the same talent now, and the former member encouraged them to carry on the tradition. Someone from my time in the club, the 1980s, shared a photo of a climbing trip, leading to an online conversation with another member of the trip, sharing and comparing the different memories they had of it. So this gives an inkling of one part of the way the collective memory is being maintained.

Seeing things from the Community's Standpoint

There's something we need to define, as a club, to help find an answer to maintaining our records. What, in terms of the Tramping Club, is an authentic, reliable record? And what is the essential metadata we need to be preserving? What constitutes its content, context, and structure? These are questions I will continue to work through with club members as this research goes on.

A pointer to this was something I observed when I first began the interviews. If I was interviewing someone I didn't know, they would look me up in old club committee lists to find out about me, and when they found I had been on the committee and that my parents had been in the club too they were very happy to talk with me. When I told one that my son was also in the club he said "You're just the right person to do this."

People are seen as reliable holders of information, and also signposts to find reliable sources. When I asked people how I could find out about the club collective memory, they all pointed me towards particular people who were seen as knowledgeable, not towards records or publications.

Clearly, club members see the committee lists published in the jubilee book as a reliable record, but they understand some of the other club publications as less reliable. One told me he had recently been discussing a trip he did in the 1980s with a fellow tramper. They were trying to work out where they had been, essentially re-creating the story of the trip between them. They had written a trip account in the club magazine, *Footprints*,¹⁸ but he said they had written it as a "fairy-tale." Instead, they were using maps and photos they had taken at the time, together with their own memories of the trip and hints they could pick up from the fairy-tale they had written.

After lots of interviews and reflection, I've come to realise my first

question was from a very archives and records-centric point of view. Instead, I need to turn it around, and reframe my question, first thinking about how the Tramping Club maintains its collective memory, and then looking at the role played by records.

Preliminary Observations

– maintaining collective memory in the AUTC

It is much too early in the research to be talking about results, but the initial interviews have led to some preliminary observations.

Storytelling plays a major role – in passing on club lore about people, places to go, routes to take, possible dangers and how to meet them, all kinds of tramping skills and so on, and also in maintaining relationships, an essential part of the club. The stories are usually told with a lot of humour but also sometimes with other emotions, including remembered fear and sadness. Stories can be told for a range of reasons, often several at once: some are cautionary tales, some are very funny, but always the tendency is to help bind us together, and to bring new people in rather than to exclude, so if outsiders are there, things which are obscure to them will usually be explained.

The structure of the club itself is a significant factor, as people taking on committee positions learn a particular area of the club's knowledge from their predecessor. Vice presidents are former committee members appointed to stay connected with the club to keep their knowledge available to current members, while the President is a very long-term member who is always a University staff member, and can provide back up if there are gaps in knowledge. Life members have the same role at a greater distance.

As a community of practice, learning through doing things – tramping, running the club, playing club games – alongside experts forms a major part of the passing on of knowledge and skills to maintain the club's collective memory.

There are events repeated every year, including regular tramping trips, social events held in different specific places, as well as training schools such as Snowschool and Bushschool where tramping knowledge is formally passed on through teaching and practicing techniques. The Committee Handover dinner is a formalised chance for outgoing committee members to pass on information to the new members, while the trips launch before summer is a chance to pass on tips and advice on where to go and what skills are needed. The annual photo competition highlights the importance of photography for the club and also gathers

a body of photographs which are now shared on Facebook and often published in the annual magazine.

Groups from each generation of past members have a get-together to catch up at least once a year, while club-wide reunions, which happen every ten years or so, are an opportunity for current and former members to get together and share stories and ideas between generations – though of course this also happens naturally with the children of former members. Some recent members have been surprised to find out that events they thought they invented have been done since almost the beginning of the club. The annual May Camp is such a significant fixture that even though it's now held in July, it is still called May Camp. One year, the members at the time had a go at re-christening it "Pirate Camp" but it didn't stick: It was back to May Camp the following year.

Places are also a significant part of the collective memory maintenance, particularly the much-loved and very uncomfortable club hut, and the noticeboard or statue where we used to gather every lunchtime, but also whole areas such as the Waitakere ranges, the Hunuas, the Olivine Ice Plateau, Nelson Lakes, many South Island river valleys... For each era of trampers there are stories associated with these that can be shared between eras, and the places accrete layers of meaning which are reactivated and shared when their names are mentioned.

The club publications are important, for sharing trip accounts, whether factual or semi-fictional, and stories about other club events, as well as photos, and particularly lists of committee members, while commemorative publications such as the 60th jubilee book provide an overview and reminder of Tramping Club life for new and old club members.

But most of all, it is the continuing relationships between people as they continue to meet and share experiences and stories and ideas and memories together that keep the club's collective memory alive. The club constitution written in the 1930s stated that the aims of the club were, first: to encourage tramping and alpine sports amongst the members of the University; and secondly: to foster a spirit of comradeship amongst members of the Club and others interested in tramping and alpine sports. The centrality of comradeship also builds in, from the beginning, what I am beginning to see as the basis of the club's recordkeeping system: trusted interpersonal relationships. The club is building a resilient community of practice by consciously practicing as a community.

All of these activities form a record of the club, and at the same time more traditional records play a supporting role in all of them, in many

different ways – photos, maps, diaries support storytelling; membership lists can be used to invite people to events; and so on – there are gear lists, search and rescue forms, trip lists, the hut lease document, the club constitution and so on all resulting from these activities and structures but also needed to support and maintain them, and in so doing they also support the maintenance of the club's collective memory.

The club culture is resilient, but still many of the tangible records are at risk – for most of the paper, photographic and digital records not in archival hands there is no preservation plan in place. Soon we will be reaching the next stage of the project, which is where we need to start working out how this emerging model of collective memory maintenance can be supported by archival systems, making sure the tangible records can be preserved in context, so they will be discoverable, accessible, authentic, reliable and usable for Tramping Club members into the future.



Footprints through space and time – AUTC tramping party on the Olivine Ice Plateau, mid-1980s. *Photographer: Mark Battley.*

Footprints through space and time was the theme of the conference at which I first presented this paper, and it happens to be the name of my project too. This is an image of some footprints created by some people from my era in the club, the 1980s, in the Olivines. This image has passed through space and time to be recreated on this page today, and if I had the space, I could tell you my version of the story about them that someone told me when he found this photo in his slide collection a year or so ago.

I stated earlier that this project is aiming to bring about transformation, and already the process of this research is doing just that,

not only in raising awareness amongst club members of the importance of preserving club records and in giving them access to information on preservation, and reconnecting club members with distributed records that only a few knew about, but also in causing us all to reflect on our experience of the club and the relationships that have developed from it. The feedback I have had so far is that this reflection has led to positive results, including the renewal of friendships and more collective-memory building events and activities. In the words of one of the participants "We spent nearly 3 hours trying to understand what binds us together. We are making explicit what we all somehow know innately."¹⁹ By making this tacit knowledge explicit, it should be possible to develop an archival system to better control the records that support this community in maintaining its collective memory.

Endnotes

1. Ketelaar, E. (2005). Sharing: Collected Memories in Communities of Records. *Archives and Manuscripts*, 33, 44–61.
2. Hedstrom, M. (2010). Archives and collective memory: More than a metaphor, less than an analogy. In T. Eastwood & H. MacNeil (Eds.), *Currents of Archival Thinking* (pp. 163–179). Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited.
3. Cunningham, A. (2005). Archival Institutions. In S. McKemmish, M. Piggott, B. Reed, & F. Upward (Eds.), *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* (pp. 21–50). Wagga Wagga: Charles Sturt University. Centre for Information Studies; McKemmish, S., Reed, B., & Piggott, M. (2005). The archives. In S. McKemmish, M. Piggott, B. Reed, & F. Upward (Eds.), *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* (pp. 159–195). Wagga Wagga: Charles Sturt University. Centre for Information Studies.
4. Schwartz, J. M., & Cook, T. (2002). Archives, records, and power: The making of modern memory. *Archival Science*, 2(1–2), p.17. Note also McKemmish & Piggott on the archival multiverse (McKemmish, S., & Piggott, M. (2013). Toward the archival multiverse: Challenging the binary opposition of the personal and corporate archive in modern archival theory and practice. *Archivaria*, 76(Fall 2013), 111–144); Gilliland, Lau & McKemmish and Chris Hurley on the need to allow for multiple views of provenance (Hurley, C. (2005). Parallel provenance: If these are your records, where are your stories? *Archives and Manuscripts*, 33(1)).
5. Huvila, I. (2008). Participatory archive: towards decentralised curation, radical user orientation, and broader contextualisation of records management. *Archival Science*, 8, 15–36. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-008-9071-0>
6. Ketelaar, E. (2005). Recordkeeping and societal power. In S. McKemmish, M. Piggott, B. Reed, & F. Upward (Eds.), *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* (pp. 277–298). Wagga Wagga: Charles Sturt University. Centre for Information Studies, pp.296-297
7. Gilliland, A. (2014). Reconceptualising records, the archive and archival roles and requirements in a networked society. *Knygotyra*, 63, 17–34.
8. Shilton, K., & Srinivasan, R. (2007). Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections. *Archivaria*, 63(63); Reed, B. (2013). Access Today. Recordkeeping Roundtable. Retrieved from <http://recordkeepingroundtable.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/access.pdf>; Battley, B., Daniels, E., & Rolan, G. (2014). Archives as multifaceted narratives: linking the "touchstones" of community memory. *Archives and Manuscripts*, 42(2), 155–157. Note also the call for new professional approaches that support alternative frameworks of knowledge and memory in: McKemmish, S., Faulkhead, S., & Russell, L. (2011). Distrust in the archive: reconciling records. *Archival Science*, 11(3–4), 211–239.
9. Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
10. Ketelaar (2005). p.54
11. Bastian, J. A. (2003). *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History*. Libraries Unlimited, p.5
12. Wegner, DM (1995). "A computer network model of human transactive memory." *Social Cognition* 13(3): 319-339.
13. For some examples of inclusive research designs and community partnership research, and commentary on the benefits and requirements, see Evans, J., Faulkhead, S., Manaszewicz, R., & Thorpe, K. (2012). Bridging Communities. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(7), 1055–1080; McKemmish, S., Burstein, F., Manaszewicz, R., Fisher, J., & Evans, J. (2012). Inclusive Research Design. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(7), 1106–1135.
14. Stoecker, R. (2012). *Research Methods for Community Change: A Project-Based Approach*. SAGE; McKemmish, S., Burstein, F., Manaszewicz, R., Fisher, J., & Evans, J. (2012). Inclusive

- Research Design. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(7), 1106–1135; Beebeejaun, Y., Durose, C., Rees, J., Richardson, J., & Richardson, L. (2014). "Beyond text": exploring ethos and method in co-producing research with communities. *Community Development Journal*, 49(1), 37–53.
15. Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (2003). Friendship as Method. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(5), 729–749.
 16. University of Auckland Library (n.d.) Inventory of the records of the University of Auckland Tramping Club [sic] 1936-1978. Retrieved 13 October 2015 from <http://www.library.auckland.ac.nz/data/mss/uotramp89-22.pdf>
 17. Archives New Zealand (2011). Great Barrier Huts Visitors Books (22963). In *Archway* [Archives NZ Online finding aid]. Retrieved 13 October 2015 from <http://www.archway.archives.govt.nz/ViewEntity.do?code=22963>
 18. *Footprints* magazine, sent to all current members and life members, is also collected by the National Library, the University of Auckland library and is from time to time distributed amongst tramping huts in the back country. Some issues are also held by the Auckland City Library. A few copies have been digitised, and can be seen on the AUTC website: <http://www.library.auckland.ac.nz/data/mss/uotramp89-22.pdf>
 19. MW, by email, 17 May 2015