

## Indigenous voices in the State Library of NSW

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### **Abstract**

Located just above Sydney Cove where the British invasion of Aboriginal land began in 1788, the State Library of New South Wales holds the world's most extensive collection on the European exploration and colonisation of the Australia and its region and the subsequent development of Australia. Much is held about the Indigenous peoples including manuscripts, publications and images. Some were created by Indigenous artists and chroniclers but the majority comes from others including explorers, government officers, missionaries and settlers as well as the more recent ethnographers, historians and writers. Many of the records are fragmentary and hidden within documents dealing with other matters.

The State Library is working to expose those records and to make them available appropriately in consultation with Indigenous communities. Through building relationships with communities, it also seeks to include more and stronger Indigenous voices to reflect on Indigenous experience and provide commentary on the material in the Library's collections. The Library's partnership with the NSW public library network offers a means for engagement with communities as well as an opportunity to provide better services to Indigenous people.

### **Biographical Notes**

Kirsten Thorpe is the Manager of the Indigenous Services Branch at State Library of New South Wales. She is passionate about creating spaces of engagement for Aboriginal people to connect with archival sources documenting their history. Kirsten's professional and research interests relate to the return of archival sources of material to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the opportunities that the digital domain presents for communities to be actively involved in managing their cultural heritage resources. Kirsten is a descendant of the Worimi people of Port Stephens NSW and is descended from the Manton, Feeneys and Newlin families.

Dr Alex Byrne is the State Librarian and Chief Executive of the State Library of New South Wales following posts in library and university management at several Australian universities. He is also the Deputy Chair of National and State Libraries Australasia, a partnership of the National Library of New Zealand and the national and state libraries across Australia. Alex served for a decade in leadership positions with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions including President from 2005 to 2007.

## **Acknowledgements**

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this great Library has been created, the Gadigal of the Eora nation, and pay our respects to their elders past and present; we acknowledge our shared freedoms and responsibilities, inherited from Magna Carta through the common law; and we acknowledge our welcoming of the peoples and cultures of the world; all three elements shaping our Australia.

## **Introduction**

Located just above Sydney Cove where the British invasion of Aboriginal land began in 1788, the State Library of New South Wales (NSW) holds the world's most extensive collection on the European exploration and colonisation of Australia and its region and the subsequent development of Australia. Much is held about the Indigenous peoples including manuscripts, publications and images. Some were created by Indigenous artists and chroniclers but the majority comes from others including explorers, government officers, missionaries and settlers as well as the more recent ethnographers, historians and writers. Many of the records are fragmentary and hidden within documents dealing with other matters.

The State Library is working to expose those records and to make them available appropriately in consultation with Indigenous communities. Through building relationships with communities, it also seeks to include more and stronger Indigenous voices to reflect on past and contemporary Indigenous experience and provide commentary on the material in the Library's collections. The Library's responsibilities for public libraries under the Library Act 1939 and its partnership with the NSW public library network offer a means for engagement with communities as well as opportunities to provide better services to Indigenous people and to more comprehensively involve Indigenous people in setting priorities, building and interpreting collections and providing services.

This paper reviews the State Library's relationship with Australia's Indigenous peoples through the prism of the ATSI/LRN Protocols. Twenty years from their first publication in 1995, the Protocols have become an accepted framework for engagement between Australia's libraries, archives and information services and Indigenous peoples and their knowledge and culture and are influential in other sectors and internationally.

The Protocols traverse the domains of institutional governance and management, staffing and professional practice. They guide collection development through a focus on content and perspectives, description and classification, and accessibility and use. The concerns of Indigenous people are particularly addressed in regard to secret and sacred materials, offensive materials, intellectual property, and copying and repatriation. The institutions' role in promoting community awareness of Indigenous peoples and knowledge and the challenges of today's digital environment complete the framework.

## **Governance and management**

As Australia's oldest library, tracing its history back to the establishment of the Australian Subscription Library in 1826, the State Library of NSW has been collecting and making its collection available to readers and researchers for nearly two centuries. But Indigenous presence in the Library's governance and management is only a recent development.

Professor Martin Nakata, Director of Nura Gili at the University of NSW and a Torres Strait Islander, was appointed as the first Indigenous member of the Library Council of NSW in 2013. For the first time, there was an Indigenous person on the Library's board, a body which also has statutory responsibilities under the Library Act 1939 for the 369 public libraries across NSW. This was a most significant step for the State Library and the public library network and for the NSW Government which made the appointment. Professor Nakata's appointment confirmed the commitment of the Library and the Government to engagement with Indigenous peoples.

The Library Council also agreed in 2013 to the establishment of an Indigenous Advisory Board to assist it and the Library in that engagement. At the time of writing, the Advisory Board has not been activated because of the need to bed down major reviews of the Library's structure and management. In addition in that year, and following a lengthy heritage approval process, the Library added a third flag pole so that it could fly the Aboriginal flag to recognise Aboriginal sovereignty alongside the New South Wales and Australian flags.

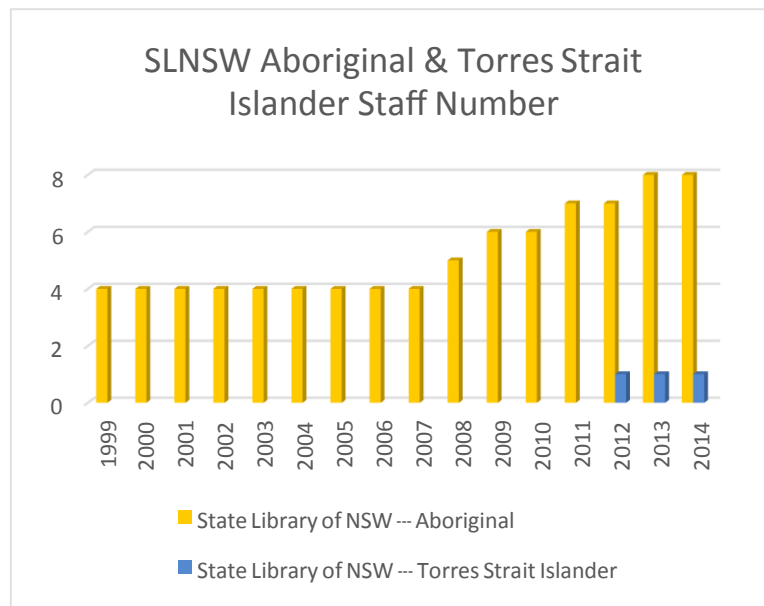
In the previous year, Ms Kirsten Thorpe, a descendant of the Worimi people of Port Stephens NSW, was appointed Coordinator of the newly established Indigenous Unit within the Access & Information Branch, the branch responsible for reading room and related services. The Unit became a Branch, and hence Ms Thorpe became the Manager of the Indigenous Services Branch, on 1 July 2014 following the Library Council's approval of a new structure for the Library on 24 February 2014. At the same time another Aboriginal descendant was appointed as a manager. They are the first Indigenous managers at the State Library, demonstrating the Library's commitment to equal employment opportunity and opportunities for Indigenous staff in particular.

These key appointments, growth in the number of Indigenous staff, establishment of the Branch and the development of its business plan, approval for the Indigenous Advisory Board, flying the Aboriginal flag and a developing range of practices and guidelines marked 2012--14 as a watershed in the evolution of the State Library's commitment to the Aboriginal peoples of the state and Indigenous peoples beyond its borders but represented in the Library's collection and among its clients.

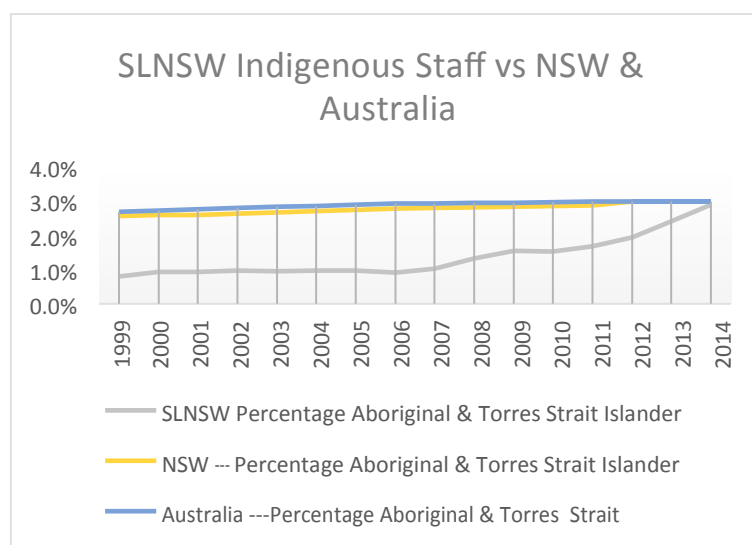
## **Staffing and professional practice**

These developments built on the achievements over the two decades since the State Library fostered the training, employment and advancement of two Indigenous Librarians. During that time, the Indigenous Librarians, Mr Ronald Briggs and Ms Melissa Jackson, worked in the Access & Information Branch to provide services to readers and researchers, especially those using materials relating to Indigenous peoples, consulted with Indigenous

communities and researchers, guided the Library’s policies, curated exhibitions and provided collection advice.

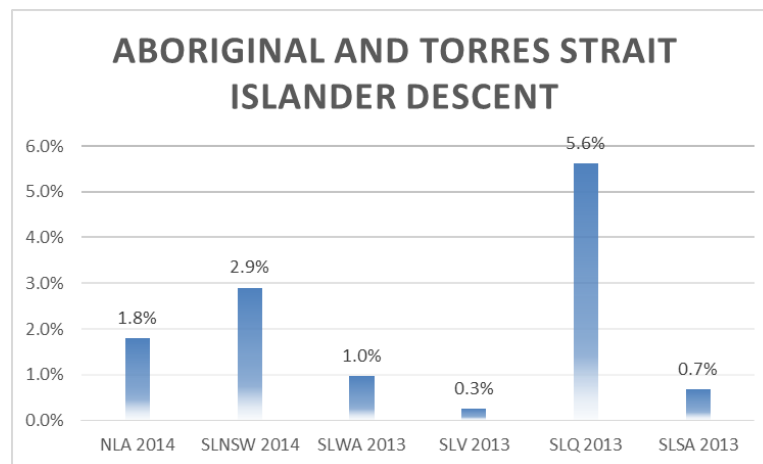


However, the number of Indigenous staff remained static at four until 2007. Since then the Library has been successful in progressively increasing the proportion of Indigenous staff and now has two managers of Aboriginal descent and one staff member who identifies as a Torres Strait Islander. In addition, two staff members in the Indigenous Services Branch are undertaking off campus tertiary studies to obtain their qualifications as librarians. As the graphs below indicate, the Library has now reached the national and state benchmarks in the proportion of Indigenous staff and is doing well compared to its peer institutions with the exception of the State Library of Queensland which includes staff employed in a number of Indigenous Knowledge Centres located in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



Data is not readily available on Indigenous employment in public libraries in NSW as it is subsumed into Indigenous employment data for local councils. A number of councils employ Aboriginal library officers but it appears that Indigenous employment in NSW public libraries

remains below the state benchmark. This is an area which the State Library should seek to influence.



These have been significant improvements but there is still more to achieve at the State Library and across the NSW public library network. The Library has a role to influence the staffing of public libraries and professional practice throughout the network. It is not simply a question of ‘cultural awareness training’ but demands a reorientation of Australian library practice to embrace our Indigenous heritage and to welcome our Indigenous compatriots to our institutions and their services. Public libraries across NSW have the opportunity to create meaningful and sustainable careers for Indigenous people in local communities.

## **Collections**

As a major collecting institution, the State Library of NSW is charged with collecting the documentary heritage of the State of New South Wales in all of its forms from manuscripts to ephemera, maps to photographs, artworks to books and journals, paper and print to audiovisual, digital and realia. The collections continue to grow steadily through legal deposit, donation and purchase. They reflect the life of NSW today as well as its history and the European exploration and colonisation. Because of the Library’s early establishment and vigorous collection development, the collection is of national and international importance, covering all of Australia and the surrounding seas and islands and extending to Australia’s cultural roots especially in Britain and other European nations.

## ***Content and perspectives***

However, the records of Australian Indigenous experience and culture are fragmentary, often superficial, and largely from the perspective of the outsider and occupier rather than the peoples themselves. The early records consist of the observations of navigators and naturalists and, following colonisation, military officers, government officials, clergymen and settlers. Ethnologists and historians came later, applying their developing methodologies but still from the outside, often seriously misunderstanding and misrepresenting Indigenous culture and experience as Nakata (2007) has shown. Many were well intentioned but were unable to step outside their frames of ‘civilisation’ – especially ‘British civilisation’ – versus ‘savage’. Their comprehension manifested as an extreme form of Said’s (1978) orientalism,

displaying a "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice" against Indigenous peoples and their culture.

The perspective of the peoples themselves was seldom recorded and seldom included in the collections of the State Library of NSW and other libraries and archives. Occasional and usually fragmentary records exist in correspondence with those in authority described the current situation of Indigenous individuals, families and peoples but little described their cultures from their perspectives. The voices of Indigenous people and records documenting Indigenous perspectives of country, culture, community and family are historically absent in the major cultural heritage and collecting institutions.

As Jason Glanville, CEO of the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence, noted recently in relation to media (2014):

"Our first nations communities have not only survived 226 years of enforced, institutionalised and entrenched disadvantage but have thrived and found extraordinary ways to express ourselves through visual arts, business, academia, science and education. Yet the coverage of Aboriginal people I saw in the media showed only the deeply negative things my grandmother and her generation experienced. It left out their good humour, positivity, resilience, capacity for excellence and determination to contribute.

"... We should, and will, create channels in print, digital and broadcasts to amplify the story of indigenous excellence. It remains incumbent on the media to ensure that when telling the indigenous story, they tell the full story to remind everyone of the good as well as the bad. Indigenous Australians are coming up with creative solutions to banish entrenched problems, promulgating the notion of indigenous excellence as not just an ambition but a growing reality." (Glanville 2014)

The same obligation rests on our libraries, archives and information services and demands a fresh commitment from the professionals in those organisations, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to wholehearted Indigenous inclusion in our workplaces, programs and services.

It is glib to claim, as is frequently stated, that Indigenous culture was not a written – sometimes 'literate' – culture and therefore no records could be expected. The Aboriginal peoples of New South Wales had a rich cultural life which is recorded in rock carvings, paintings, carved trees and decorated artefacts across the Sydney region and the whole colony, later state, and which was celebrated in ceremonies which were remarked upon by early colonists and settlers. Some Aboriginal people took up European pencils and paints to express their perspective, others wrote expressively, especially as colonisation wore on. With notable exceptions, such as William Dawes, few of the European visitors and settlers attempted to gather records of the cultures in the peoples' own words and there were many measures to suppress culture and language.

Given the opportunity, many from NSW would have spoken in similar vein to Rosalie Kunoth-Monks recent statement (2014):

"You know, I have a culture. I am a cultured person. (Speaking Alyawerr) Iylpmwa arpenharl---then angkem. Iylpmwa atyengenh iteth---antey [Translated: I'm talking

another language. And my language is alive]. I am not something that fell out of the sky for the pleasure of somebody putting another culture into this cultured being.

“John [Pilger] shows what an ongoing denial of me is. I am not an Aboriginal or, indeed, Indigenous. I am Arrernte, Alyawarre, First Nations person, a sovereign person from this country. (Speaking Alyawerr) Apmer nhenheng---ntyelarl ayeng arratek [Translated: This is the country I came out from]. I didn't come from overseas. I came from here.

“My language, in spite of whiteness trying to penetrate into my brain by assimilationists --- I am alive, I am here and now --- and I speak my language. I practise my cultural essence of me. Don't try and suppress me and don't call me a problem. I am not the problem. I have never left my country nor have I ceded any part of it. Nobody has entered into a treaty or talked to me about who I am. I am Arrernte Alyawarre female elder from this country. Please remember that. I am not the problem.” (ABC Q&A 2014)

The State Library seeks to redress this historic omission by exposing Indigenous content in its collections, exploring its meaning in consultation with the Indigenous communities from which it comes and collecting records of contemporary Indigenous experience in NSW. We aim to be culturally open and respectful, eschewing the ‘assimilationist whiteness’ in favour of a richer and more enfolding cultural tapestry.

### ***Accessibility and use***

A key aspect of that drive to more wholeheartedly represent Indigenous experience and to render the State Library and public libraries more relevant to the Aboriginal people of NSW and other Indigenous people who have made the state their home, is to make the collections accessible and facilitate their use while remaining sensitive to concerns about particular content as will be discussed below.

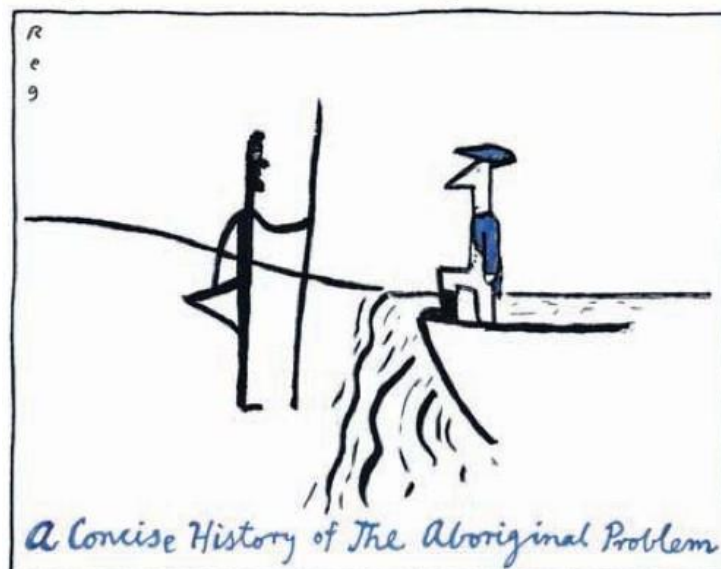
To that end, the State Library has pursued over the last three years the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages Project with support from Rio Tinto. A researcher, Dr Michael Walsh, was engaged to explore the Library's collections in order to uncover materials which record Indigenous languages. Often hidden within records that primarily relate to another topic, the records mainly consist of word lists which are, in many cases, the first written record and sometimes one of the few records of a language. Despite the limitations of word lists without grammar or indications of usage, the records are most valuable for cultural strengthening and, sometimes, linguistic revival. The Library has developed a specialist website to facilitate interaction and consultation with Indigenous communities with a view to making the materials as widely available as possible (Thorpe & Galassi 2014).

This invaluable work offers a model for similar uncovering of other Indigenous related content in the Library's collection. It is vital that the Library takes steps to identify collections relating to Indigenous communities and to proactively inform these communities of the existence of these records.

### **Description and classification**

As has been discussed at some length in the literature (Fourmile 1989; Janke 1998; Russell 2006; Gilliland & Willer 2014), description and classification of Indigenous related content has often been wanting because of the deficiencies in standard thesauri and classification systems applied by libraries and archives that have traditionally embedded the 'otherness' of Indigenous peoples through the use of terminology such as 'primitive' and through privileging institutions such as missions as major headings rather than highlighting the people subjected to the institutions.

Much has been done to redress this situation, especially through the application of the AIATSIS Subject Thesaurus (AIATSIS 2014) but it remains a challenge to be addressed progressively in large collections such as those of the State Library. More appropriate terminology and description will be achieved through the consultative processes of the Library's Indigenous Services Branch. Special care notices that alert clients to potentially offensive or derogatory content also become important tools to guide respectful engagement with Indigenous people and communities.



*Published Sun---Herald Sunday, 15 Jun 2014 ---Page 31 'Now there's an answer'  
in Peter Fitzsimmons column.*

The collections of many public libraries include material concerning Indigenous peoples and books and music by Indigenous creators and some, especially those in areas of high Aboriginal population, feature those collections. This is laudable but the collections, however well intentioned the collecting may have been, tend to continue to place Indigenous people as 'the other', outside the dominant and privileged collections of 'whiteness' which represent 'normality' for our libraries. We are beginning to establish a broader discourse that reflects the complexities of Australia and the richness of its people including the diversity of Indigenous experience.



## **Key issues**

The concerns of Indigenous people about accurate and appropriate representation gain particular force in regard to secret and sacred materials, offensive materials, the ownership of intellectual property, and the questions of copying and repatriation.

### ***Secret and sacred materials***

Although the State Library has not sought to collect secret and sacred materials per se, manuscripts, publications and especially photographs can include secret and sacred content. The Library seeks to manage these records appropriately in consultation with relevant Indigenous communities.

A case in point is the photographs of the carved trees that were found throughout Western New South Wales before most were removed in land clearing. Many of the images are not considered secret or sacred, some are men's business which should be restricted. In preparing the exhibition *Carved Trees: Aboriginal cultures of western NSW*, shown at the State Library from 18 April to 26 June 2011 and later toured to public libraries as a panel exhibition, the Library took care to consult with the traditional owners. Only images of these powerful cultural records which had been rated acceptable were displayed but, nevertheless, a complainant felt that none should have been shown.

The State Library responds to advice from Indigenous cultural advisors about appropriate access and display of materials. In some cases materials that have been considered as being secret/sacred, and may which have gender restrictions, have been published and made available in the public domain. The Library has the opportunity to note any culturally sensitive materials in catalogue records relating to collection items. By doing this the Library can inform the wider public with information on appropriate cultural protocols relating to collections.

### ***Offensive***

Concerns about offensive material includes that which needlessly exposes personal and private matters and that which denigrates Indigenous people. Of particular concern are photographs of Indigenous people in chains and those of skeletal remains. While there may be contexts in which it is appropriate to show such images – as in presenting the treatment accorded to people – gratuitous display of such images is considered offensive as it would be for other people.

It has sometimes been suggested (Windschuttle 2002, for example) that sensitivity to concerns about secret and sacred and offensive materials is tantamount to censorship. However, it is customary for libraries and archives to judiciously apply restrictions for various reasons including security classification, temporary periods of restriction or embargo which may last 30 years, privacy or commercial in confidence restrictions, injunctions or other legal prohibitions such as those for defamatory content. Most restrictions can be lifted to enable serious inquiry with appropriate consultation where relevant but the materials are not made available to satisfy casual or prurient interest. Few Indigenous people object to access to sensitive materials to support serious research but may object to open display or publication. In common with other institutions, the State

Library seeks to respect such concerns while supporting free inquiry. The Library has managed such access with Indigenous guidance since the appointment of its first Indigenous Librarians.

### ***Intellectual property***

There is an inherent conflict between the orthodox view of intellectual property as a tradeable commodity which is owned by an individual or organisation and may be sold, assigned or exploited during a defined period of protection and the enduring, community based ownership of Indigenous knowledge. This is being addressed internationally through research, discussion and negotiation at the World Intellectual Property Organisation and in other fora.

However, for libraries the additional and most problematic consideration is that ownership of copyright rests with the creator and consequently the expression of Indigenous knowledge which is recorded in a book or other publication is copyright to the recorder, not to those from whom it was recorded. In the absence of measures to resolve this conflict, libraries and archives can only seek to consult with communities and resolve any conflicts or concerns sensitively.

### ***Copying and repatriation of records***

The State Library is digitising many important items from its collection through its Digital Excellence Program. This process results in the transformation of analogue content into digital formats which can then be further transformed and widely promulgated. Thus a manuscript list of words in an Aboriginal language may come online as an image of the manuscript, a transcription into ASCII, a searchable database, a spoken version and so on. The process of transformation needs to be handled perceptively and sensitively with consultation when appropriate.

The process of digitisation also raises the possibility of the digital repatriation of records to those they concern. Rather than the repatriation of the actual records which might conflict with legislation or policies regarding the retention of records, especially for archives, and can present communities with the challenge of preserving precious records in unsuitable environmental conditions, digital repatriation preserves the originals in optimal conditions while making excellent copies available, often in more useable formats. But management of the digital versions must still be in accordance with cultural requirements. The State Library has been investigating the open source Mukurtu software for that purpose. The Library wishes to be able to use such software, and accompanying protocols, to manage materials itself but also to be able to assist public libraries, Indigenous knowledge centres and other keeping places to manage materials appropriately. This will provide a significant opportunity for communities to have digital access to content relating to their local community and a mechanism for collections to be enhanced and amplified.

## **Awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and issues**

As a major cultural institution, the State Library of NSW has a role in promoting community awareness of Indigenous peoples and knowledge. As a library it fulfils this role through collecting, describing and making available both historic and contemporary materials. It also provides advice and consults with Indigenous communities.

However, the State Library is also a museum, gallery and archive and consequently communicates much through exhibitions and accompanying catalogues or other publications. The major Indigenous exhibitions mounted on site in the Library in recent years have been:

- *Eora: Mapping Aboriginal Sydney 1770---1850*, 4 June to 13 August 2006. Co---curated by Keith Vincent Smith and Anthony Bourke
- *Mari Nawi: Aboriginal Odysseys 1790---1850*, 20 September to 12 December 2010. Curated by Keith Vincent Smith
- *Carved Trees: Aboriginal cultures of western NSW*, 18 April to 26 June 2011, Curated by Leigh Purcell and Ronald Briggs.

They have been well received, although visitors have been somewhat lower than for similar non Indigenous exhibitions, perhaps demonstrating a reluctance among the general public to show interest in Indigenous culture. This in itself is a strong reason to present such exhibitions.

Awareness has been taken to country New South Wales by touring panel versions of *Carved Trees*, and more recently Indigenous images have been displayed in the *Behind the Truth* travelling display to public libraries, eliciting stronger public interest in some country locations than was evident at the State Library. The Library also has a role to work with the public libraries to promote awareness which many do through participation in NAIDOC Week and other events, through tailored programming and via displays.

## **The digital environment**

When the *ATSILIRN Protocols* were first published in 1995, the Internet was in its infancy and 'digital content' essentially meant library catalogues and databases of abstracts for journal articles. Since that time, the digital environment has burgeoned. Not only is there an enormous amount of content – both born and made digital – but the content appears in ever proliferating formats. Video, audio and interactive content are as readily accessed as still images and text. Maps are not only presented as images but are also geo---coded and interactive with dynamically updated content and live links to content and services. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social media are the means of everyday conversation and comment.

Through its Digital Excellence Program, the State Library of NSW is seeking not only to digitise an enormous amount of important content but to use fully the current and emerging capabilities of digital technology. This has significant implications for the Library's Indigenous services because it makes it possible to make Indigenous content more readily and appropriately available and to collect Indigenous content dynamically.

A first step in exploiting the technology is the launch of the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website. The website will:

- make available, in a culturally appropriate framework, surviving language lists to Indigenous communities
- develop protocols for the publication of language lists, to ensure that they meet community needs and allow communities to contribute their knowledge to Library records about their languages
- locate previously hidden language lists in the Library's collections
- increase public awareness of Indigenous language and cultural history
- be an effective educational resource contributing to school curriculum and further research.

The website will encourage Indigenous people, and those interested in Indigenous languages, to get involved with the project. It will encourage open and respectful discussion about the collection items and their connection with language revitalisation and community use.

## **Conclusion**

Demonstrated visibly and symbolically by the flying of the Aboriginal flag on Macquarie Street, the street of the parliament and governor of NSW, the State Library of NSW has significantly advanced its services to Indigenous peoples and its acquisition and management of Indigenous content since the appointment of its first Indigenous Librarians two decades ago. Replacing an approach to collecting by happenstance with a more purposeful approach and progressively addressing the dimensions of the ATSI LIRN Protocols, it is now well positioned to become exemplary in its relationship with Indigenous communities and its capacity to tell of Indigenous life in New South Wales in the past, present and future.

The State Library also has a broader role in the community which is manifested particularly in its relationship with the public library network across NSW. This relationship and the State Library's own public and educational programs provide the means to promote a new, more engaged approach to professional practice in archives and libraries and to contribute to greater understanding throughout the community.

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