Judges, Governors and Changing Libraries

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Introduction

Invariably when discussing the future of libraries, questions are raised to do with how libraries can maintain their relevance in an age where the creation of content is primarily digital. Where as in decades past libraries have been an obvious point of reference for people to access information that will help them, people can now find many of these responses through devices they have at home or carry in their pocket. This has led to a number of questions being raised in governments, media and in public discourse about the continuing relevance of libraries in 'an age of knowledge vastly richer than the old model based on printed publications' (Hanmer, 2013).

An automatic response to this situation might be, and has been, to list the digital platforms a particular library is not currently engaged with and consequently make every effort to do so. For what would a library be if not connected with the current trends in information production and the creation of online communities?

This paper however, suggests that before leaping to such a response, libraries may have to go back to fundamentals and question why they exist in the first place. The two authors of the paper, Michael Carney and Holger Aman, are two young librarians who have begun careers in the traditional institutions of the State Library of New South Wales and the New South Wales Law Courts Library. Working in these spaces, which coexist with other fundamental institutions of Australia such as Parliament House and The Mint, has led the authors to develop a particular interest in the founding principles of libraries. They believe the heritage of their libraries, the oldest libraries in Australia, continue to have an important story to tell in the current information and knowledge climate.

New South Wales Library foundations

State Library of New South Wales

In addition to the cows, convicts, pianos and roughly a thousand people that came into Sydney aboard the First Fleet in 1788, there was also a variety of reading material. In early New South Wales conversations began to get underway between like-minded men, including Governor Macquarie, regarding setting up a library in 'promoting the general diffusion of useful Knowledge' (Jones, 2013). By 1826, the Australian Subscription Library was formed and membership involved a joining fee of five guineas with an ongoing annual fee of two guineas. By 1869 however, the subscription library had fallen into financial ruin and the New South Wales Government decided to take it over and re-opened it as the 'Free Public Library'. In 1895 it was renamed to Public Library of New South Wales and in 1975 it became the State Library of New South Wales.

A very significant part of the State Library's story occurred in 1906 with the bequest of David Scott Mitchell, a prominent collector of material relating to Australia, the Pacific, the East Indies and Antarctica. On imparting his collection to the Library, Mitchell also provided funds for a building to house the collection which has become the site on Macquarie Street where The State Library stands

today. This original building, constructed in 1910, has consequently extended its size and collection through another bequest by William Dixson in 1952, who like Mitchell, provided funds for building alongside his Australiana collection.

In contrast to the failure of its initial setup as a private subscription library, the story of the State Library's success has been pillared upon the gifts of individuals with the hope of using them to benefit the people of New South Wales.

New South Wales Law Courts Library

In a similar fashion, The New South Wales Law Courts Library, began with a collection of books that was transported by the original English settlers for their new colony in New South Wales. The books were originally dispersed in book rooms throughout the original Supreme Court building, built in 1829, to provide points of reference for the administration of justice in the new settlement.

Funding issues for the library were an issue even in 1842. The Supreme Court judges attempted to raise the stature of the library by charging a levy for practitioners however the government withheld this revenue, insisting that that the fees be paid into Treasury (Bennett, 1974). Thankfully William Charles Wentworth, the explorer and lawyer, supplemented the library by permanently loaning his legal books, many of which still exist in the collection today. The library was further enhanced by the bequeathment of Chief Justice Sir James Martin's law library in 1886 and funds by Sir Frederick Darley in 1910.

It was not until 1975 that the New South Wales Law Courts became its own entity, when the Commonwealth of Australia and the State of New South Wales jointly funded a shared library in the law courts building. From its foundations, the library owes its existence to the gifts of individuals who freely distributed their materials of knowledge in the hope of greater justice in the colony.

The Library as a gift

What emerges from the founding stories of both The State Library of New South Wales and the New South Wales Law Courts Library, is the libraries' traditions being deeply rooted in the gift of disseminating knowledge for the greater good. The same concept is true for libraries all around the world. In his essay 'On libraries', British technology theorist Tom Chatfield contrasts the experience of entering the space of a public library with entering an equivalent digital space (2013). His local library in Streatham, like others around it, was given to the state by Sir Henry Tate in the 1880s and has its doorway marked with the pledge, 'a gift to the inhabitants of Streatham'. Chatfield juxtaposes this welcoming doorway to the experience of entering a digital gateway, which offers the visitor a series of contracts they must enter into. These agreements stipulate that the user is no longer on public territory, but in a space where the material belongs to the data provider. Information here is not experienced as a gift, but through the intermediary of a privatized space.

The increasing privitisation of Internet spaces is not a new story according to author Tim Wu. In his book 'The Master Switch' (2010), Wu documents the history of the major modes of telecommunications modes such as telephony, radio and television arguing that these systems each began as 'open technologies' with feelings of an 'almost utopian possibility and idealism'. As these technologies progressed however, he argues that there came a way for the market to integrate and centralize the medium to gain a certain measure of control for its economization. Wu describes this

pattern of telecommunications history as 'a cycle', whereby a technology is born in all its chaotic, optimistic and problematic forms until it is taken control of by the market, and then disrupted by a new innovation.

Whilst the Internet is still a relatively new phenomenon and is realising many of its potentials, its form is beginning to crystallize, and as Robert McChesney has suggested, we have somewhat of a home base from which 'we can see where we came from and where we might be headed '(2013). One of the features of a centralized Internet, is that search behaviour itself has become an economy. Unlike the commodification of other forms of mass media, such as radio which has involved the commercialization of content, much of the content on The Internet remains free, though the commodity lies in the means by which to locate it. This is apparent in the way search engines broadcast advertisements alongside search results, and also through tracking how people search for and find information online. Searching for information on the Internet is an enormous industry and this affects what we find when we search and how we evaluate it (Halavais, 2009).

Another feature of The Internet that has crystallized is the formation of online communities. People are drawn together through their friendships and mutual interests and create and join networks for the purposes of sharing information. In this type of information behavior, Eli Pariser has identified a 'filter bubble', where we create individual universes of information for ourselves. The information sources in these environments are the people and organisations we align ourselves with, eliminating 'the meaning threats, the confusing, unsettling occurrences that fuel our desire to understand and acquire new ideas' (2013, p. 89). Commentators have also remarked on the way the 'filter bubble' impacts on democratic debate, where online political groups merely tune into their own political perspectives. Paul Sheehan, writes 'the communications revolution, with the rise and rise of social media, has created the architecture for fundamentalism, where echo chambers of like-minded zealots affirm their righteous indignation at the cultural stupidity of the unbelievers. The ugliness of the fundamentalism is confined to neither right nor left. It sits at both extremes of the political pendulum' (2013).

The purpose of this paper is not to promote either a 'celebrant' or 'skeptical' approach towards the Internet, but rather to draw attention to the effect it has on the ways information is disseminated. The age old truism that 'you are, what you eat', is just as true as one's thoughts being the product of the information they consume (Wu, 2011). Whilst there is often an assumption that the internet is a neutral, democractic and free information space, by lifting the lid on the history and operations of communication industries, it is quite apparent that people's information behavior online can often provide them with merely populist, marketable and self-affirming results. It emerges here that the salient role of Libraries is to continue their tradition of being the 'true free' information space. With firm foundations as a gift to the people, libraries can stake claim to their gift as 'a free encounter with culture, knowledge, learning and delight' (Chatfield, 2011).

Libraries in the digital realm

The question now shifts to how Libraries can continue their said traditions and find their place in an already information overloaded online environment. The authors wish to point to two relevant examples in each of their work places.

State Library of New South Wales

In 2012, The State Library of New South Wales entered into a formal collaboration with Wikimedia Australia, an organization run by volunteers who work across a number of Wiki projects including Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia and Wikimedia commons, an online repository for copyright free images. The organization provided The State Library with full day training sessions and in turn staff at The State Library created and enhanced Wikipedia articles relating to their collection material. The agreement benefitted both organizations as Wikimedia gained researched content from people trained in citing reliable sources and digital images of important historical sources such as journals, photographs, paintings, objects and manuscripts etc. The State Library gained exposure for their collection materials through Wikipedia, the 6th most visited website globally (Alexa, 2013). The project, still ongoing, has resulted in the creation of 100 articles and the content enhancement of 34 articles relating to the history and lives of people in New South Wales.

What is particularly significant in the context of this paper, is the collaboration of two organizations committed to the free disemmanation of information in an uncommercialised space. Wikimedia's stated goal is to 'develop and maintain open content, wiki-based projects and to provide the full contents of those projects to the public free of charge' (2011). This goal aligns with the traditions of the State Library of New South Wales and is an effective platform by which the library can meet part of its strategy to '… make accessible the documentary heritage of New South Wales' (2013). The collaboration is notable on behalf of the Library as it is somewhat of an acknowledgement that it is no longer the first port of call for the audience it intends to reach. However, by aligning itself with another organization with a parallel philosophy it is a great step towards giving greater authority and power to open and democratized information spaces.

NSW Law Courts Library

In 2013, The NSW Law Courts Library Department of Attorney General and Justice Library Services adopted digital tablets to replace or supplement a number of loose-leaf subscriptions as working tools for Magistrates and some Judges. The advantages of digital technology in this instance are immense, as they provide an automatically updated reference tool with portable access outside the walls of the library and the courts. The physical size and weight of the digital devices just 600 grams, compared with many kilograms of books, increases the efficiency of access to the wealth of information that is relied upon in the administration of justice. The implementation of this rollout continues the library's tradition of enabling access to legal information that the Judiciary needs in the most effective and efficient means. It is a library service in the online environment that allows important judicial access to information that is used for the common good of society.

Conclusion

In the current information climate libraries are operating on a similar plane to some of the world's largest corporations in their mission to provide people with information they are looking for. With reference to the heritage of two of Australia's oldest libraries, this paper has argued that whilst libraries may appear outdone by the seamless services provided by these companies, they will continue to find their role in society by offering online and physical spaces where knowledge and information is shared without an alternate agenda. Instead of chasing their tail and attempting to catch all the latest information sharing platforms, libraries will be at their best if they continue to uphold their tradition as institutions that provide information for no other sake than its own.

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