**DENOON — Interrogating**

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**Interrogating Our Collections: Interrogating Ourselves**

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The State Library of NSW is custodian for a suite of extraordinary collections documenting the heritage of Australia and Oceania. In an age where technology has become entrenched in everyday life, the Library is working to transition digitisation of these collections from ‘a special project’ to ‘business as usual’. In this way the Library seeks to ensure collections are more meaningful to more people.

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Increased access to collections is highlighted here through the lens of the Library’s diaries from World War I. Commemorations of the war have generated significant community enthusiasm for learning about the history of this conflict, particularly the personal stories of Australian servicemen and women. In response to increased interest in the diaries, and associated materials, the Library embarked on a project to transcribe (in 2008) and digitise (in 2013) over 1,100 diaries. An important, resource-intensive, and parallel project was the upgrading of the provenance history of the diaries and a close examination of their copyright status (which is varied). Considerable work was also undertaken to enhance descriptive metadata (including authority records)—the very foundation of subsequent data-sharing projects linking these diaries to other data repositories.

This has facilitated significantly easier access to the collection and simultaneously presents opportunities to interrogate this material in new ways, including patterns that might be revealed from a geo-location analysis. There are also options for general crowdsourced tagging and high-level interactions with the diaries, to track individual word usage and assist in unpacking broader themes around grief and loss or post-traumatic stress disorder. Such research will enable the identification of trends that are there—anticipated and unanticipated—but also those trends that we might expect but are missing.

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Interrogating a collection such as this demands that the Library interrogate its own practices. How do we curate collections and subsequently allow for easy navigation of content in an increasingly digital world? For the State Library of NSW, another key question is how do the neat and polished presentations of digitised material convey the complexity of the Library’s holdings? The World War I diaries, for example, are in sharp contrast to the symmetrical war service records—formatted information on standardised index cards—of those who served. The diaries, which like many collections have their own peculiarities, are very much a suite of personal objects with differences between volumes, including binding type, paper type, handwriting styles, and the inclusion of sentimental objects such as flowers and postcards, while some diaries have been taken apart and mounted into albums. This has generated critical conversations around not only which collection should be digitised but also how much detail from each collection needs to be captured (core content only or core and peripheral content?) to meet the needs of researchers and maximise the potential of the digital environment.

Additionally, the Library needs to ask how it structures meaningful relationships to avoid being simply a cipher of content. How do we manage the risk of privileging certain kinds of content? In a space where datasets are made available with a ‘take it and play’ philosophy, how do we measure interaction with, and scholarly outputs from, materials made available? Indeed, all libraries need to ask questions that support the future of data collection and data use. Decision making needs to be transparent and produce results that align collections with digital humanities researchers; especially those looking to distribute content in a less labour-intensive, mediated way.

**Conclusion**

Digitisation is a great equaliser, democratising knowledge, yet this has the potential to merely change repositories from onsite to online. Collecting institutions can be fantastic interpreters of their often unique collections and need to maintain this role. They also need to be prepared to share, as research projects can be enhanced through the combination of new data sources such as transcriptions and geo-coding and traditional metadata, all of which have resource implications. The authors argue that the questions asked of the World War I materials held by the State Library of NSW can also be asked of some of the other collections for which the Library is a custodian. Moreover, potential to explore these collections within a digital humanities framework needs to be examined, and new opportunities explored: What would happen, for example, if war images were put through facial recognition software? Of particular importance, alongside the creation of new knowledge, is the generation of new ways of storytelling and how traditional research can intersect with creative practice to produce different ways of seeing and understanding.