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**Scaling Up Digital Public History: Lessons Learned from the Find & Connect Web Resource Project**

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16 November 2014 marks the fifth anniversary of the Australian government’s apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants. When then–prime minister Kevin Rudd stood in the Great Hall of Australia’s Parliament House in 2009, he moved a motion of apology to the approximately 500,000 people who were placed in orphanages, children’s homes, and other institutions in Australia in the 20th century. In that speech was a line committing to ‘a national database that will collate and index existing state identified records into a national searchable data base, accessible to state and other care leaver services and also directly to care leavers themselves’ (Prime Minister, 2009).

The resulting three-year National Find & Connect Web Resource Project (http://www.findandconnect.gov.au/) concluded in November 2014. Though work on the web resource will continue (at a substantially reduced level) for some time, this milestone provides a significant opportunity to examine one of the largest publicly funded digital history projects in Australia. In this paper, senior members of the project team will reflect on what worked and what could have been done differently—on success stories and lessons learned.

In preparation for funding the proposed ‘national database’ the government undertook a scoping study, looking at activities around the country. Some states did have existing guides to institutions and archival records, but these were static, point-in-time print documents. By contrast, in Victoria researchers from the University of Melbourne and Australian Catholic University were already working digitally, as part of the Australian Research Council–funded project Who Am I? The Archive as Central to Quality Practice for Current and Past Care Leavers (Forgotten Australians). A significant component of the project was the Pathways dataset and web resource, which documented the history of child welfare, collections of records, and key resources (including publications and images) in Victoria from the 1840s to the present (O’Neill et al., 2012; McCarthy and Evans, 2012). As noted by the government in September 2010, ‘It is important that the website design is based on sound principles which will stand the test of time and cater to the complexity of the content and search functions’, and that ‘No other example of a specialised website designed to cater for care leavers, with the search functionality and archival integrity of Pathways, was identified in Australia or overseas during the scoping study’ (Department of Families, 2010).

Following a tender process, the core Who Am I? project team was entrusted with expanding the Pathways model nationally. In this paper, we will explore how the project team scaled up a local, relatively contained state-based resource produced as part of a research project to produce a national, government-funded resource utilised by Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants and their families, as well as support services, advocacy groups, governments, record holders, past providers, researchers, and the general public.

The Find & Connect web resource covers the history of out-of-home ‘care’ for children and young people spanning eight states and territories and nationally (each jurisdiction with its own legislation and context) and more than 150 years, with a primary focus on 1920–1989. At the time of writing, the resource consists of nine underlying databases and more than 1.5 million words of scholarly content, presented to the general public through more than 16,000 web pages. The content has been created and curated by 25 core staff (with assistance from many others) including archivists, historians, and technology staff, overseen by three senior academics from the University of Melbourne (Associate Professor Gavan McCarthy and Professor Cathy Humphreys) and the Australian Catholic University (Professor Shurlee Swain).

With regard to technology, the data collected is structured as a nonhierarchical network of entities and relationships, utilising international standards for the description of entities, archival resources, publications, and digital objects while also extending those standards where required to meet the needs of the project. Over the course of three years, archivists collaborated with technology staff to develop capability in rendering, indexing, and visualising content, including standardised XML (McCarthy et al., forthcoming). Underpinning all this, the technology base of the eScholarship Research Centre was expanded to ensure more robust preservation of data and support high-availability web services.

Challenges emerged in a number of key areas:

• *Technology*: Some of the underlying tools were utilised due to their informatic strength and proven capability; however, legacy issues created problems when working as part of a distributed national team and development of the underlying technology was not as rapid as initially hoped.

• *Web design and usability*: In attempting to present complex historical narratives and networked information models to nonspecialist audiences, the team uncovered a range of usability and design issues. Some of these have been largely overcome while others require further work (Jones and O’Neill, 2014).

• *Resourcing*: The balance of archivists to historians to technology staff was planned and budgeted from the outset, based on a projected understanding of the project and its parameters. Some of these early decisions put limits on what was possible later in the project.

• *Scalability*: Some of the processes and practices around content development, editing, quality assurance, and informatics that produced high-quality results for the Who Am I? project were put under significant strain when working at scale.

Despite these challenges, the project has achieved notable success, including substantial visitor numbers, very positive feedback from stakeholders and the community, markedly improved results in usability testing, and the fostering of communities of practice around the country with an enhanced awareness of the issues facing the sector. In terms of scholarship, the project has researched and documented the history of institutions providing out-of-home ‘care’ across the country, and the records and resources related to those institutions, in more detail than ever before; and this information has been captured and stored in sustainable, extensible ways for the benefit of researchers and the community at large.

Our experience also has findings relevant to public history and digital scholarship more broadly. The team’s long, iterative approach to content development and interest in sustainability and persistent citability was distinctly different from most other government websites and online content development projects. Conversely, historians working around the country found their practice and priorities were influenced and shaped by an unfamiliar immediacy and regularity of feedback on their work (much of which was first made publicly accessible while still just a work-in-progress) from users and the large, multi-disciplinary project team of which they were a part.

Historians and archivists also met regularly with users and stakeholders in the project, and this ongoing engagement in a sometimes charged, politically active space meant academic freedom was tempered by the need to negotiate language, representation, and content with individuals, groups, and governments.

In this long paper, senior members of the Find & Connect web resource team will explore the success of the project, reflect on the challenges encountered, and raise some of the implications for public and digital history more broadly. They will conclude by outlining their hopes for the Find & Connect web resource in the future, and the ways it could be linked more effectively to other digital initiatives within Australia and internationally.

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