Blog 2

It’s an incredible thing to watch an idea come to life, from your brain, to reality.

After two weeks working in with the DX Lab we are excited to present Main Street.

Main Street is the result the Labs first a two week ‘digital drop-in’ <http://dxlab.sl.nsw.gov.au/digital-drop-in/> program and explores how the collection at the State Library of NSW could be used in conjunction with a NSW regional collection, to provide a beautiful digital experience that explored both collections comparatively.

Main Street uses a selection of images of “Main Streets” from the Tweed Regional Museum Collection (running on top of the page) and compares them to a set of images of “Sydney Main Streets” from the SLNSW Collection (bottom of page). The data sets are organised in sequential order ranging from the 1880s to 1950s. The middle of the page shows common words from newspapers of that year, the Sydney Morning Herald and the Tweed Daily.

The project provides scope for the future addition of “Main Streets” from other regional collections with very little effort involved.

**Lessons learnt**

One of the foundation ideas of this project was to use of collection API’s (Ehive <http://developers.ehive.com> , the SLNSW <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/using/search/open_data.html> , and TROVE <http://help.nla.gov.au/trove/building-with-trove/api>) to manipulate data.

All good in theory. In reality the data, both from the TRM and the SLNSW, just wasn’t up to the task. To be both useable, and presentable, I had to curate a data set of 100 images from both collections, fixing spelling mistakes, dates formats, general errors, and making sure to choose images that showed a range of main street activities and that were also a good size resolution.

It reminded me of cultural heritage technologist Mia Ridge encountering similar problems playing with the Cooper Hewitts collection data back in 2012, <http://labs.cooperhewitt.org/2012/exploring-shape-collections-draft/>. What Mia found then, that “The quality of collections data has a profound impact of the value of visualisations and mashups. The collections records would be more usable in future visualisations if they were tidied in the source database “ is sadly still true 3 years later. It’s obviously not an easy problem to solve, and one that most collecting institutions face. Seb Chan pointed it out in 2012 when he said “the truth is that our data sucks. And by ‘our’ I mean the whole sector.” <http://www.freshandnew.org/2012/08/museum-datasets-un-comprehensive-ness-data-mining/>.

Big data is not for every project and ultimately I think Main Street benefitted by hand curated data sets, to provide better look and feel and also to provide a more in-depth contextual experience. I also think the project highlights how important the role of the curator is in digital and web projects.

This is not to say API’s don’t have their place in being powerful tools for big data projects http://dxlab.sl.nsw.gov.au/making-loom/, just that they may always need a curatorial hand in producing meaningful storytelling.

I was heartened in my two weeks at the Library to witness the curatorial, cataloguing, and even conservation staff participating in brainstorming workshops for the DX Lab, and in general being deeply engaged in what was happening in the digital spaces the library inhabits.

The other thing I did in my two weeks (most of the project work lay at the feet of the brilliant DX developers) was to complete a short and basic Code Academy course in PHP https://www.codecademy.com/learn. I may never be called on to code anything, but I think it’s now almost mandatory for curators to understand how coding works. I also think it is timely to remember the next generation of curators will hit the job running, bringing coding skills to the table as a baseline skillset.

We have documented the process in full available here. The code will be made freely available on github.

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