



Art Centres and Digital Archiving

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One of the discussions which took place at the ANKAAA Kimberley regional meeting this year focused on the subject of digital archiving for art centres. This is a timely topic for ANKAAA to be addressing, as many in remote communities run the risk of being left behind in the realm of digital knowledge platforms and the multiple opportunities they offer. The discussion was lively, particularly as participants began to learn more about the potential and risks of various aspects of digital archiving. ANKAAA is well positioned to advocate for and support the aspirations of northern remote art centres in this regard and we're sure that staff left the meeting equipped with adequate feedback to design their planned Digital and Other Archiving Strategy.

This is an issue which Desert River Sea has also been encountering during art centre visits. Two in particular are illustrative of the benefits and difficulties associated with establishing digital archives. One north Kimberley community has been extensively recorded (via photography, film and audio) since its establishment last century and had a great deal of cultural material removed from it; very little remains for community members to freely access. This situation is worsened by the fact that most residents have no home internet and a few computers for shared use were only made available at a community resource centre two years ago. Computer literacy is low and there is minimal awareness of the existence of historical material held elsewhere, let alone the possibility of accessing it online. Much of the world now takes this for granted; it is hard to conceive that some remote centres in Australia have their disadvantage multiplied by being mired in the technological past. Every year this situation continues the impact on a community's potential for self-empowerment in the realms of education, health, economic and cultural sustainability is reduced. Two simple examples we encountered illustrate this: local women in the community mentioned above are attempting to teach young girls traditional dance, but due to the frailty of the few remaining singers they must rely on a single old tape for their accompaniment. They are desperately trying to seek another copy before it breaks, but their isolation stacks the odds against them. They would also like to start a cultural centre alongside their small art centre as, amongst other things, a centre of community pride and identity but have little hope of achieving this without the most basic infrastructure. A digital archive in community would immeasurably increase opportunities to reconnect with their own past.

By contrast the better-resourced Mowanjum Art Centre in the West Kimberley has recently established a digital archive in their media centre (pictured below). This was achieved with the assistance of the WA State Library as part of their Storylines Project, an 'online archive for the State Library's digitised heritage collections relating to Aboriginal history in Western Australia'.¹



Mowanjum community using Storylines digital archive. © Mowanjum Art Centre 2015. Photographer Mathew Scurfield

Mowanjum is equipped with dedicated computers and local staff who have been trained by the library to maintain, extend and control (when authorised by senior men and women) this evolving archive of information. The value of this resource to the art centre and the community can be gauged by the enthusiasm with which local people use it to broaden their art and cultural activities, readily accessing and contributing to their own oral histories, film, music and material culture.



Mowanjum staff member Maitland Ngerdu working on Storylines. © Mowanjum Art Centre 2014

For the 89% of the Australian population clustered in urban areas the value, if not absolute contemporary necessity of digital archiving is self-evident. In remote regions such as the Kimberley opportunities to facilitate archiving lag compared to the rest of the country however, with little awareness of the implications of this situation and how it might be impacting on communities. Of the many positive reasons for digital archiving for remote Indigenous groups, some are quite distinct to those for the mainstream population. They fall into two categories – archiving of historic material *digitally returned*, and storage of material already in communities but in outdated, damaged or unmanageable hard copy formats. The benefits could be outlined as:

Digital archiving of returned material

- The digital return of material not otherwise available for repatriation. This includes historic photographic and film records of people, places, cultural practices and cultural materials. At best an archived digital collection can form the nucleus of a remote community or art centre cultural keeping place including contemporary and historic objects.
- Digital return of material to communities from far-flung collections and institutions is much less contentious and time-consuming than the repatriation of actual objects. It need not impede such repatriation processes and can at least be an interim measure. Digital return is increasing seen as an example of best practice by collecting institutions who understand the need to engage practically and meaningfully with the original custodians of their Indigenous holdings. In some cases digital return is

mutually agreed upon as the best way to enable community access to historical material whilst keeping the actual material safely stored.

- Control of information can be returned to communities along with a digitised collection and, following appropriate protocols for ensuring intellectual, property and moral rights, information can be shared between institutions and communities to mutual benefit.
- Control of information extends to the ability of a community to maintain its own access protocols related to gender and seniority.
- Indigenous community identity and cohesion can be reinforced when its own history is as readily available to itself as it is for others.
- Digital archives enable the strengthening and reinvigoration of culture for communities which have had much historical information and material removed post-settlement, and where the irreplaceable oldest generation is rapidly diminishing.
- Digital archives are a rich resource for contemporary art practitioners wanting to reconnect with historic objects, in the absence of the pieces themselves.
- A community digital archive can contribute to the revival and retention of local languages
- Digital archives offer teaching / learning opportunities for intergenerational cultural transmission.

Digital archiving of art and culture records already held

- Many art centres have early records on paper and as recordings on outdated media such as tape or film. These are at serious risk of damage or destruction by adverse environmental conditions, unsuitable storage and over-use. Making digital copies and archives of these records ensures their security and longevity.
- Appropriately archived digital resources restore equality of access by community members as information no longer needs to be locked away. Recordings at risk of over-use (early music tapes for example) can be copied into more robust formats suitable for contemporary hardware and ease of use.
- A digital archive of community or art centre collections can be an important component of a community cultural keeping place including contemporary and historic objects.
- Digitally archiving early art centre / community records also safeguards them as an important historical record with national relevance.

This appears to amount to a watertight case for the establishment of digital archives in remote communities / art centres. There are nevertheless issues to address:

- The costs of establishing and maintaining an archive. With partnerships (such as the Storylines initiative) these need not be prohibitive, however they remain an impediment for smaller art centres and communities already struggling financially. For those centres needing to digitise their own extensive records there is also a substantial labour component involved in scanning and uploading. The rapid pace of technological change also necessitates format updates to keep data accessible.
- Urgency to digitise – before the old formats become irretrievably damaged, and before meta-information is lost with the passing of older generations.
- Amount of material not yet digitised by collecting institutions and not readily available to share.
- Training requirement. Computer literacy and archive training, as well as education for art centre staff on the burgeoning development of external public archives and how to search for, access and request material for their own use.
- Risk of further marginalisation of communities not sufficiently resourced to either acquire or house a digital collection.

- The possibility that digital repatriation of historic material will be perceived by some institutions as an opportunity to defer difficult discussions regarding the ethical imperative for repatriation of actual objects in many cases.

It is evident there are great social and cultural benefits to the establishment of digital archives in remote art centres and communities which should not be eclipsed by the difficulties in doing so. Their value can be readily gauged by the success of those already developed. *Ara Irititja*ⁱⁱ developed for the Anangu people of central Australia was an early ground-breaking initiative which has substantially paved the way for others to follow, either by example or by the re-purposing of their software (as with Storylines).

An additional consideration is the relative importance of intangible and tangible cultural heritage in an Indigenous context. The west has always held its tangible heritage high esteem; it commoditises and collects to the extent that it requires objects to house its objects. In contrast, Australian Indigenous cultures place great emphasis on intangible heritage; their oral traditions, performance, ritual and other expressions of esoteric knowledge, social and environmental law. How can this be 'housed', safeguarded from loss or exploitation in an era of globalisation?



© Mowanjum Art Centre Photographer Mathew Scurfield 2015.

These issues have been recognised for some time. The UNESCO Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of 2003 outlines:

The importance of the intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development...

The deep-seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage...

That communities, in particular indigenous communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and re-creation of the intangible cultural heritage, thus helping to enrich cultural diversity and human creativity...

At Article 13 a number of measures adopted for consideration are listed, amongst others to:

(c) foster scientific, technical and artistic studies, as well as research methodologies, with a view to effective safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, in particular the intangible cultural heritage in danger;

(d) adopt appropriate legal, technical, administrative and financial measures aimed at:

(i) fostering the creation or strengthening of institutions for training in the management of the intangible cultural heritage and the transmission of such heritage through forums and spaces intended for the performance or expression thereof;

(ii) ensuring access to the intangible cultural heritage while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects of such heritage. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention>



Mary Lou Divilli with her photographs of son Noah. © Mowanjum Art Centre 2015

Digital archives can be repositories for contemporary as well as historic material, they are evolving platforms.

The Mowanjum community bases StoryLines at its art centre which is, like other Kimberley art centres, working hard to involve younger people and has been exploring the potential of digital art forms. Mary Lou Divilli, for example, recently produced evocative black and white portraits of her young son, photographed against a black background with traditional hand stencils projected on to his body (pictured above). Visiting artist Craig Walsh introduced the international *Inside Out Project* to Mowanjumⁱⁱⁱ which resulted in the *My Face Our Place* 'drive-thru' gallery installation in Derby, as well as large-scale digital projections on community landmarks (pictured below). Mowanjum's historical archive both informs and is enriched by this experimental work using photography and video. Their Storyline continues into the future.



Mowanjum Barnjamedia digital projection © Mowanjum Art Centre 2014

Relative to the enormous sums allocated to the shifting feast of other short-term remote community programs marked by dubious outcomes, minimal sustainability and zero community ownership, cultural archives at the very least offer tangible socio-cultural return for modest outlay. An argument can easily be mounted that a digital archive be considered an essential resource for every major remote community or art centre and supported accordingly. Mainstream communities expect no less after all, and are considerably better placed to ensure this happens.

'This documentation I am doing is for generations to come, I feel very proud of what I am doing for my people. In time our mamarngarl (countrymen) will benefit from the work I have done to document the storylines of our people'. (Sherika Nulgit, Barnjamedia Trainee Digital Collections Officer^{iv})

With thanks to Mowanjum Art Centre for the photographs accompanying this essay.

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- i http://www.slwa.wa.gov.au/for/indigenous_australians/storylines. Accessed 19.10.2015
 - ii <http://www.irititja.com/> Accessed 19.10.2015
 - iii <http://www.insideoutproject.net/en/best-of> Accessed 20.10.2015
 - iv <http://www.mowanjumarts.com/keeping-place/community-collection/> Accessed 15.10.2015