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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the impact of change on the State Library of New South Wales (Australia), a large public research library charged with the care and continuing use of a documentary heritage. The first section provides background on the State Library, including history, collection, mission, and use. The second section describes library clients, including four distinct client groups (i.e., professional readers, personal interest readers, work/business readers, and students), development of a three-tiered service model, promotion and development of information literacy. The third section describes collections, including the addition of items to the library's World Wide Web catalog, the preservation of paper and electronic resources, and collection development policy. The fourth section considers the importance of two key capabilities, i.e., the competencies of library staff, and the success of collaborations with other organizations. The fifth section addresses context, presenting libraries of documentary heritage as part of a broad canvas of political, economic, and social values. (Contains 18 references.) (MES)

The Impact of Change on Research Libraries: The State Library of New South Wales

By: Maxine Brodie

Proceedings

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Maxine Brodie

Introduction

Change is a process marked by the alteration or substitution of one thing for another. A research library is a system made up of clients, library facilities, staff, collections and services, and a complex web of interrelationships, including those with other libraries, organisations and the wider political, social and economic environment (Buckland, 1988). Some changes are profound, affecting all parts of the system; some are more specific, affecting different parts. As this paper is one of four providing a university/research library perspective on the impact of change, I will concentrate on issues more specific to a large public research library charged with the care and continuing use of our documentary heritage. For the State Library of New South Wales, change is most evident in our clients, collections, capabilities and our relationship to the wider context.

Background

The State Library of New South Wales is the major public reference and information service for the people of New South Wales. Our national and international reputation as a research library rests on the expertise of our staff combined with the unique and comprehensive nature of our collection of the documentary heritage of New South Wales. The Library traces its origins to 1826 with the opening of the Australian Subscription Library. In 1869 the NSW Government took over responsibility for the library and created the Sydney Free Public Library. In 1895 the name of the Library was changed to the Public Library of New South Wales and again in 1975 to the State Library of New South Wales.

The Library's collection of 4.9 million items contains both published and original materials in a wide variety of formats. Many of these items are of national significance, such as 19th century images of Aboriginal peoples, the Tasman map, nine of the eleven known journals of the First Fleet, the papers of Sir Joseph Banks, NSW newspapers dating back to 1803, the first book printed in Australia, the oldest surviving Australian photograph and architect Jorn Utzon's papers and drawings relating to the Sydney Opera House. The collection has recently been valued at $1.509 billion, reflecting the unique nature of the materials held.

Our mission is to inspire, educate, inform and entertain by providing quality library and information programs to support the cultural, research and educational needs of our clients. We value respect for knowledge, commitment to learning and integrity of service. Our services range from providing quick access to current information through to in-depth research into historical materials. Services are provided to people who visit the State Reference Library and the Mitchell and Dixson Libraries in Macquarie Street, Sydney and to remote clients via mail, telephone, fax, the website or electronic mail. The Library receives 1.2 million onsite visitors, registers 1.3 million uses of its collections and has over 4.5 million page views (16 million hits) on its website per year. We also run an extensive program of exhibitions and public events designed to attract tourists, clients and supporters.

Clients

Our individual clients are extremely diverse in age, educational level, cultural background and physical abilities. They approach the search for information in different ways depending on their role or needs, for example, as an academic researcher or as a casual browser. We also have strong relationships with a wide variety of organisations at a local, regional, national and international level. These 'organisational clients' encompass libraries, other cultural institutions, such as galleries and museums, government agencies, large and small businesses, and all levels within the education sector (Brodie, 1997). Such a broad client profile means that, in addition to providing general services, we also have to design services for specific client groups.

In 1999 we began a co-ordinated program of client research to inform our development of services for these different client groups (Burgess, 1999). The initial focus was on the perceptions of users of the Mitchell Library - the service for Australiana research. This has been followed by some research with clients of the State Reference Library. Put simply, the major difference in client perceptions of the role of the two services is this: the Mitchell Library *is a* community; the State Reference Library is *for the* community. Many Mitchell clients view the Library as a constant in a world of change and as a highly personal workspace. This means that all change is regarded with suspicion, by old and young alike. Perhaps surprisingly, this theme is also reflected in virtual services, with clients reporting repeat usage because of the 'safety and credibility' of the website.

The Mitchell Library is used by four distinct client groups:

- Professional readers - historians, academics or researchers specialising in Australian history or literature, who typically have an intense and ongoing relationship with the collections and staff, often over many years
- Personal interest readers - family or local historians, who often have less experience in library use, have a strong personal connection with their research and can require frequent assistance
- Work/business readers - who conduct research for business purposes, not necessarily restricted to Australiana, for example, picture researchers
- Students - honours, postgraduate and doctoral, who may be making the transition into new conceptual frameworks, such as those in cultural studies.

All groups, however, including 'virtual' clients, share the expressed desire for increased independence in library use. The Library's response to this has been the development of a tiered service model. The first tier is provision of introductory information and services for first-time or infrequent users. The second tier provides subject assistance and item request services for clients who already have the basic information. The third tier is for researchers with advanced requests requiring specialist staff expertise, or specific spaces and services for long-term research. Elements of each tier will be reflected in both physical and virtual services.

For this model to succeed, many clients will need assistance to develop effective skills to find, use and evaluate information. The State Library will need to take a more active role in the promotion and development of information literacy as a key competency for the 'lifelong learner' (Bundy, 1998). Clients using online services also need to be technologically literate to cope with the 'mysteries' of computer and Internet use. While technological barriers are disappearing through greater exposure for the younger, more affluent city dweller, they are still very real for other socio-economic groups. The Library's service offerings need to take this inequality of access and experience into account.

Years ago, the Mitchell was the exclusive domain of the professional reader. Now almost 75% of clients are in the personal interest or student groupings and many of them view the small, close-knit professional group as elitist. Not surprisingly, many professional readers see this change as an erosion of their physical, intellectual and social space. Increased diversity in the background, skills and intellectual approach of clients is a challenge for the provision of research library services. This increasing diversity highlights the need for more research into the changing nature of

researchers' needs and behaviours, particularly in the humanities. Reports prepared recently for the Coalition for Innovation in Scholarly Communication (2000) indicate the need for more systematic investigation into the changing nature of research in and across disciplines.

Collections

Contemplation of information needs in the humanities leads naturally to a discussion of the changing nature of library collections. Sukovic (2000) summarises the requirements of researchers in Australian literature as access to primary sources and unpublished materials, access to books, more comprehensive bibliographic tools and good physical access to the collections. The simplistic 'just put it all online!' response to these needs is inappropriate both economically and socially. The cost of converting millions of textual items to electronic format is enormous and difficult to justify. Equally importantly, for the researcher there may be much more to the content than just its 'container' - information can, and in many cases, does have a 'social life'- the combined significance of form and content (Brown and Duguid, 1999). The implications for libraries of documentary heritage is clear - preserve the original and make it accessible. The challenge for the State Library of New South Wales is to obtain the resources to improve access for researchers - to ensure, at the very least, that the catalogues and indexes of the unique Mitchell collections can be searched online. The first step in this process was completed in July this year with the addition of the 20,000 items in the Dixson Printed Books Collection to the Library's web catalogue. Our aim is to complete the Mitchell Printed Books collection of over 200,000 items in time for the centenary of the Mitchell Library in 2010.

Resources in the humanities are, of course, also beginning to be 'born digital'. The exhortation to 'preserve the original' then presents another interesting challenge for research libraries like ours. For us it will never be an either/or proposition - it will be paper *and* electronic, not paper *or* electronic. This dual role sets us an interesting funding problem. Our funding models and bids need to be built around the total value of our collection asset, deriving ongoing, related funding streams to support acquisition, access and preservation activities. While not as severe an impact as in university libraries, our acquisitions funding has also been eroded by inflationary and foreign exchange pressures. As one response to this problem we are, like the universities, providing licensed access to electronic sources in non-heritage areas of the collections. However, with our mandate to preserve documentary heritage for future generations, it is worrying to witness the headlong rush of libraries into the 'access not ownership' model without adequate steps taken somewhere in the system to ensure continuity of access. If publishers' stock inventories disappeared in the 1970s because of a change in accounting and tax practices (Hawkins, 1993), what guarantees are there that any commercial organisation will continue to provide electronic archives when these no longer provide an economic return?

Our paper collections house items hundreds of years old and still in useable condition. Items on acid paper can be identified and converted to another format with a long life span for reasonable expense. Digital objects can and have become unusable in very short time spans because of changes to technology, lack of standards and poor management. This situation is often referred to as the 'digital Dark Ages' (Kuny, 1998) or the 'website house of cards' (Dempsey, 2000). Digital formats are excellent for fast communication and widespread dissemination, but are not yet proven for long-term preservation. Orators like Plato were, of course, equally disparaging of the written word in their time. Digital formats are beginning to have a profound effect on creation and distribution of information, eliminating the barriers of time and geography. Like all formats, however, digital will find its own niche and coexist with, rather than totally replace, other media (Borgman, 2000).

Our collection development policy applies equally to this format as to all others. Is it content that we would collect and preserve comprehensively? Is it primary material? If so, we must ensure it can be archived and used in the future. Is it an area where we collect a representative sample? Is it secondary material? If so, selective archiving, or regular 'snapshots' may be appropriate. Has it been archived by another 'memory institution'? If so, we may need to negotiate access, but not archive it.

Capabilities

Two key capabilities are important in the light of changes in our clients and our collections. These are the competencies of our staff and the success of our collaborations with other organisations.

Arms (2000) believes that almost all the skills of the information professional can and will be undertaken more effectively by the computer, except perhaps those queries involving human judgement. He assumes this means that the high cost of human labour in libraries can be eliminated, or at least significantly reduced. The banks and other users of automated contact systems have already proved this to be true - to their cost! People want and need fast access to information, but they also want and need human interaction and a context in which to make sense of their discoveries. If the banks need 'virtual tellers' then we still need 'virtual storytellers'. We have recently reaffirmed that our core skills base is that of the information professional. However, the skills to understand and manage the information life cycle and our clients' needs now need to be complemented by other specialist skills, such as computing science, marketing, accounting and finance, human relations, public relations, research and advocacy. The State Library is working to achieve this new mix of skills in its Workforce Management Plan, in an environment of enforced downsizing in the NSW public sector.

One of the distinguishing features of the 'networked world' is distribution of roles and responsibilities. Australian libraries have had a long history of networking to achieve common goals, facilitated but not dictated by technology. Despite financial and political pressures most of these traditional relationships endure. One valuable by-product of change is that new partnerships are becoming possible in the digital environment. Cultural institutions are collaborating with each other to improve services for users. One recent example of this is the launch of the PictureAustralia service (www.pictureaustralia.org), which allows clients to search across the pictorial holdings of the National Library of Australia, the State Libraries of NSW, Tasmania and Victoria, the Australian War Memorial, the National Archives of Australia and the University of Queensland Library.

Another new form of partnership is emerging in the creation of collaborative learning environments. The State Library is now in its second year of teaching a unit in the postgraduate offerings of the School of Information Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney (see paper by Todd and Kallenberger in these proceedings). In this unit, called *Virtual Information: Collections, Resources and Services*, the State Library provides students with both the intellectual framework and the practical application of ideas in its own 'living laboratory'.

As the Library continues its drive to attract additional funding there are also new opportunities for collaboration with the private sector and with university research programs (Brodie, 1999). As with all collaborative efforts, the major investment continues to be in building and maintaining viable working relationships across organisations with different cultures and aims.

Context

Libraries of documentary heritage are part of a broad canvas of political, economic and social values. The set of values that produced the Sydney Free Public Library in 1869 cannot be automatically assumed for the future. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the ongoing debate over digital copyright and in proposed pay-per-view models of information access. While it is true that 'free information' is a myth (Kaser, 2000), free access to information for citizens is the corner stone of the public library movement and has been seen as a fundamental right and requirement of a democracy. These rights have been reflected in the legal deposit legislation that supports growth of collections in libraries like ours. How these arrangements translate into the digital environment is yet to be agreed (ALIA, 2000). It is our view that appropriate mechanisms are needed in the digital environment to maintain a balance between the rights and remuneration of individual authors and reasonable access and responsible usage by individual citizens. Recent research in the UK highlights the important cultural role played by libraries in encouraging readers to experiment with unfamiliar authors and genres without financial penalty. As it turns out, this

'risk-free experimentation' is important for encouragement of diversity - and also for book sales! (Sanderson, 2000).

The current political emphasis on an 'information economy' rather than an 'information society' challenges libraries like ours to establish indicators of economic value and relevance. In this climate of economic rationalism it would be particularly disturbing to see the extremes of National Competition Policy spread beyond competitive tendering to the actual provision of public library services - as the 'community service obligation' of a commercial organisation. Fortunately, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in the equal importance of 'social capital' to community prosperity (Cox, 1995). Community research (Cox et al, 2000) reinforces the importance of public libraries to the social fabric. Libraries provide a 'safe space' for the sharing of resources and physical space among disparate groups who may not otherwise find the opportunity to interact. The enduring social importance of libraries like ours as physical spaces should not be underestimated. As already mentioned this notion of 'safety' and credibility translates into clients' expectations of our virtual identity. Again, our future identity is clearly not a choice between 'real *or* virtual' - it will be 'real *and* virtual'.

Talking about 'the impact of change on research libraries' could suggest a dangerous passivity on our part. While libraries do not set the political agenda it is important that we keep demonstrating our social and economic value in the *lingua franca* of the times. If we are successful in this the title of these papers for future conferences will (and should!) be 'the impact of research libraries on change'.

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