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Submission by the Public Programs team, National Archives of Australia, to the Functional and Efficiency Review (the Tune Review)



National Archives exhibition *Spy: espionage in Australia* installed at the Museum of the Riverina, Wagga, May 2018

Introduction

This submission has been prepared on behalf of the Public Programs section within the Access and Public Engagement branch of the National Archives of Australia. It has been prepared in the spirit of openness and a shared belief in the value the National Archives has for Australia and Australians.

It will illustrate:

- the importance of exhibitions, public programs and school programs developed and delivered by the team
- the inter-relationship between the physical and digital delivery of exhibitions and programs
- the challenges faced by Public Programs in delivering meaningful and engaging programs in an environment of declining resources

What is Public Programs?

Public Programs is an outward-facing section in the Access and Public Engagement branch. Public Programs delivers access to the collection, which is a core function legislated in the *Archives Act*

1983¹. As part of its reporting requirements the National Archives has two purposes; *to maintain the official record of the nation; and creating valued connections between the national archival collection and government, researchers and the community*². Public Programs is directly responsible for delivering against the second purpose. To achieve this the section develops and delivers interpreted, engaging and curated audience experiences, drawing upon the national archival collection. Our outputs include:

- physical and digital/online exhibitions
- school and life-long learning programs
- public events with a learning component (as distinct from corporate events)

A critical component of our work is the delivery of a national touring exhibitions program. This supports the National Archives' role as the only cultural institution with a national footprint.

The National Archives established a public programs section in 1993. Since then it has built a nationally recognised profile in offering interpreted experiences of an archival collection. No other government archives, indeed no other archives or library in Australia, is as active in this area as the National Archives.

The purpose of the work is to offer a rich experience of the national archival collection for people who otherwise may not feel that archives have meaning or relevance for them. Through user evaluation we know that people who come to our reading rooms or use our online database are often already aware of and purposeful in their archives-based enquiries but know little else of what the National Archives has. We believe that we must always strive to reach the people for whom 'archives' is a vague, misty concept, important only for scholars and dilettantes.

Our collection informs every aspect of Australian life. It includes critical evidence which underpins the workings of the Commonwealth government, and holds government accountable to the people. Our records help establish personal identity, rights and entitlements. It documents the creation of the Australian nation in 1901, and enables a deep understanding of Australians' experiences of war and immigration. From the National Archives' collection we can learn about our interaction with the built and natural environments, our creativity, our work and leisure, our relationship with the rest of the world, our memories of the past and our aspirations for the future.



¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2014C00417>

² <http://www.naa.gov.au/about-us/publications/annual-reports/2017-18/report-on-performance/index.aspx>

Indigenous performers at the opening of Australian Parliament House, 1988.
NAA: A6135, K19/5/88/23

Especially vital at this time are records relating to Indigenous histories. These records can enable a process of truth-telling and will, we hope, assist Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to walk together towards a better future.

Our collection is too important not to share. The National Archives wants all Australians to know how their lives may be enriched by finding out about our collection. There is a tendency to believe that archival outreach is a luxury, just an add-on whereas promoting and supporting access to our collection is imperative and should be considered as important as other archival processes, lest government and the public forget about us altogether.

How do we do our work?

Public Programs engages audiences with the collection through multiple platforms – exhibitions, online, life-long learning programs and school education programs.

Public Programs takes an onsite-online-offsite approach to deliver experiences that make best use of technology, resources and programs to engage audiences with the national archival collection and curated experiences, where and when it suits them.

Public Programs has a team of experts focusing on the following areas to deliver its innovative, creative and interpreted experiences:

- Curatorial Services (research, curation and interpretation)
 - A team of highly skilled curators research and interpret the collection to provide public access to the collection through exhibitions, online programs, publications and promotional material.
- Exhibition Services (project management and touring)
 - Highly skilled project and program managers deliver a range of exhibitions including permanent, temporary and touring. Each exhibition focuses on an aspect of the collection and provides new and engaging ways of telling Australian stories.
- Learning and Visitor Experience
 - Working closely with the Curatorial team, the Learning and Visitor Experience team develops a range of programs to engage audiences with aspects of the collection. The audiences range from pre-school through to over 80s, with a focus on Australian Civics and Citizenship curriculum-based programs for years 5 and 6, and History curriculum-based programs for years 9 and 10.



(left) Visitors Services Officer taking students through the permanent exhibition *Memory of a Nation 2010*
(right) visitors using augmented reality in the exhibition *Design 29, 2013*

What are the challenges?

Archives are not always easy to interpret for a broad audience. Unlike museum and art collections, archives' significance does not always reside in their visual appeal. Curators and educators create context and extract meaning from a collection that may otherwise appear inscrutable. A typed sheet of paper with a few signatures featuring Russian handwriting may not seem terribly interesting, but once you know it is Vladimir Petrov's signed request for political asylum in Australia, it can be utterly compelling. Curating from archives therefore requires exemplary story-telling ability, and a variety of techniques and approaches.

Physical exhibitions

Exhibitions have been the cornerstone of public engagement for many years, either in our national office in Canberra, or in regional venues around the country. We engage leading designers and multimedia developers to enhance the appeal of original records in the National Archives' collection. We believe that nothing replaces access to 'the real thing', and we continue to have considerable success in obtaining grant funding to tour original material to regional and remote areas.

The National Archives' school programs provide enhanced engagement and meaningful social encounters with these physical exhibitions in the National Office and on tour. These experiences, not readily available in classrooms, enable students to develop their skills in historical concepts, historical inquiry and meta-literacy in relationship to primary sources.

Digital and online exhibitions

At the same time, digital access reaches people who haven't heard of us and would never or rarely attend an exhibition or visit a reading room. Our online exhibition work has so far been relatively modest, pending upgrades to our website and ICT infrastructure. However, Public Programs has led or contributed to major online projects such as *Destination: Australia* (immigration histories) and *Discovering Anzacs* (war service), and *Vrroom* (for teachers and students). Public Programs' first step towards digital exhibitions, *Facing two Fronts*, brought together digital copies of records and oral histories to tell the stories of Indigenous Australians' service experience and how it influenced their activism for social justice and recognition. The aim is to publish this content online making it more accessible.

Public Programs uses existing platforms such as Google Arts & Culture to publish curated content, generating a wide audience reach.

Balancing physical and digital

This is an ongoing challenge. Visiting a physical exhibition is often a social experience, shared with friends and family. It allows a connection to a shared past, and diversity of perspectives can enrich the visit for all. These interactions help to foster understanding of and engagement with the national archival collection. Life-long learning programs and family activities associated with onsite exhibitions encourage intergenerational learning, helping parents and grandparents use engagement strategies to talk about issues or objects that are complex or unfamiliar. However, physical exhibitions are expensive, slow to develop and do not necessarily allow for an agile response to contemporary issues.

Digital exhibitions address these concerns, but do not replicate the social experience. A visit to a digital exhibition tends to be solitary, with fewer opportunities to purposefully or incidentally interact with other attendees.

The same challenge occurs with life-long learning programs such as speaker forums, which enable visitors to engage with current affairs topics through discussion with experts and encounters with the collection. This success is difficult to replicate online. While hundreds of people have live-streamed past forums, online viewers have not taken up the opportunity to engage online in discussion or to ask real-time questions of the panel. This is contrary to the lively discussion that takes place in the room during the program.

Public Programs also recognises that many visitors to the National Archives are over the age of 55. These visitors tend to prefer physical exhibitions to digital, and value the opportunity to speak with Visitor Service Officers to learn more about the exhibitions and programs. Digital-only exhibitions and programs may not reach this demographic.

Public Programs believes that both kinds of experiences – physical and digital – are important and one should not be emphasised at the expense of the other.

Exhibiting born-digital records

Along with other parts of the National Archives, Public Programs is grappling with how to deal with born-digital records. How can these be brought into an exhibition? How do you make an email interesting? What happens when a record has no material presence? Can there actually be an exhibition of digital objects? Is there a ‘real thing’ anymore? It is vital that we explore these questions.



A member of staff at the Bureau of Meteorology, 1970. She is holding a decade’s worth of weather data on magnetic tape. Surrounding her is the older recordkeeping technology, card indexes.

NAA: A1200, L85738

Challenges and opportunities

There are many challenges ahead, principally:

- The under-resourcing of back-of-house functions has a critical impact on Public Programs’ ability to deliver. To deliver quality public engagement programs we need:
 - Access to in-house professional conservators in the development of physical and digital/online exhibitions.
 - Timely delivery of high quality imaging and digitisation services.

- Reference services support to research and identify relevant material for exhibition. In particular, we rely on colleagues in the Description team to identify undescribed or poorly described material.
- Support of the Declassification team to examine and release records in a timely manner.
- Access to a functioning internal staff library and inter-library loan program to undertake secondary source research in a timely and resource-efficient manner. Loss of access to the staff library and a qualified librarian has impeded our work.
- We would like to be able to develop more innovative online exhibitions but, to achieve this better infrastructure, skills and appetite is required.
- The heightened cyber-security environment across government restricts access to a range of tools and solutions used by other national cultural institutions. For example Google Chrome is not available pending review for suitability. This restricts access to Google Arts & Culture platform used by national and international GLAM institutions to share content.
- There is a steady request to curate original or digital records for corporate events such as Enlighten and international visits to the Archives. This work is becoming harder to sustain in the current environment.
- We need to increase our digital story-telling capacity but lack capacity in our current program of work to pursue training and up-skilling opportunities.
- We are keen to establish an online 'lab' or sandpit to experiment with how to make born-digital records seem 'real' in a physical space. A tightly resourced environment often means a risk-averse environment.
- Maximising the reach of the resources we have available. This is already occurring in some areas such as the Book Canberra Excursions platform, a collaboration with other cultural institutions and the National Capital Education Tourism Project that promotes our school programs to a broader audience. This platform also offers a streamlined booking process, with increased efficiency of staff responsible for this function.
- Facilitated engagement with archives has been demonstrated to be very successful, but currently the National Archives is only able to deliver programs for approximately 10,000 students. We want to grow our student visits however we are constrained by space and staff resources.

Conclusion

For the National Archives to continue to deliver rich, engaging exhibitions, public programs and school programs the Public Programs team, and the National Archives more widely, needs to be supported by resourcing that truly reflects the efforts required to deliver these programs. This will also ensure legislated requirements continue to be met effectively. It is through these rich programs that Australians will come to value archives and develop their knowledge and understanding of our history in a modern and vibrant democracy.



Vote counting at National Aboriginal Consultative Council Elections, 1973
NAA: A6135, K7/12/73/23