Mastering digital lives: Cultural heritage institutions tackle the Tower of Babel

Paul Bentley[*]

This article reviews personal digital practices in a Web 2.0 world and the implications for cultural heritage institutions. Research projects examined include PARADIGM, the Digital Lives Project, OCLC's Sharing and Aggregating Social Metadata, the Australian Government 2.0 Taskforce report and the Community Created Content project of National and State Libraries Australasia. In a circumspect conclusion, a number of issues are raised that need further attention.

INTRODUCTION

Time, when it made you and me the Person of the Year on Christmas 2006, challenged Thomas Carlyle's theory that history is shaped by the powerful and the famous. It pinpointed Web 2.0 technology as the driver of a revolution, in which we are "citizens of a new digital democracy". Everyone with a digital camera, it said, now has the power to change history. The Web 2.0 world is a massive social experiment that could fail. It may have reinvented democracy, but at what cost to democracy?[1]

While Web 2.0 may be the new driver, the revolution actually began in 1975 when we turned away from the pen and the typewriter and started buying personal computers.

How do we view personal digital practices and preservation now? And, more importantly, how are libraries, archives and museums tackling information on private computers and in the cloud?

A 2010 PERSPECTIVE

Over the past three years, digital data and its consumption have continued to expand. There are now more than 1 billion PCs in the world, a number that is expected to grow to 2 billion by 2014.[2] There are about 45 gigabytes of digital information for every person on the planet. By 2011, this is expected to grow tenfold and it will expand by a factor of 10 every five years.[3] In 2008, Americans spent 12 hours a day consuming information outside working hours. Reading, which was in decline because they were looking at too much television, tripled from 1980 to 2008 because reading is the overwhelmingly preferred way they receive words on the internet.[4]

Web 2.0 tools and services have proliferated. Facebook has outstripped MySpace in popularity. Bloggers, like one-day cricketers attracted to Twenty20 circuses, have become twitterers. Wikipedia and YouTube have become routine aids for many readers and viewers.

The value of the Web 2.0 world

My thick file of press clippings on Web 2.0 topics contains items from a number of broadsheets that read as though they were meant for the tabloids. Social media sites and services are addictive and

---

[1] *Time* (no 51-52, 25 December 2006/1 January 2007).

[2] *Gartner Says More than 1 Billion PCs In Use Worldwide and Headed to 2 Billion Units by 2014* (media release, Gartner, 23 June 2008), http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=703807 viewed 10 March 2010.

[3] Ganz JF, Chute C, Manfrediz A, Minton S, Reinsel D, Schlichting W and Toncheva A, *The Diverse and Exploding Digital Universe: An Updated Forecast of Worldwide Information Growth through 2011* (IDC, March 2008), http://www.australia.emc.com/leadership/digital-universe/expanding-digital-universe.htm?cmp=ILC-carHP&panel=the+digital+universe+still+growing viewed 10 March 2010.

[4] Bohn R and Short JE, *How Much Information? 2009 Report on American Consumers* (Global Information Industry Center, University of California, 2009), http://www.hmi.ucsd.edu/howmuchinfo_research_report_consum.php viewed 10 March 2010.

---

vindictive. They are playgrounds for the narcissistic. They are tools for stalkers and paedophiles. Although they can create friendships, they inhibit real friendships. They are brimming with inanity. You can even use them to find your next date – if you are at an age when finding your next date is more important than being satisfied with your old one or settling down with a good book.

John Fowles, author of a string of notable literary best sellers and curator of the Lyme Regis Museum, once wrote that "a diary is a place you can write the things you dare not say in public, a place where you are free to vent your anger, frustration and prejudice, no matter how unreasonable those feelings might be". And, quoting William Boyd, he observed that "No true journal worthy of its name can be published while the author is alive. Only a posthumous appearance guarantees the prime condition of honesty".[5] But Elizabeth Farrelly detects a shift in the attitudes of younger generations in her observation that the internet is a place for a new kind of exhibitionism, a place "where young people are willing to expose failures and vulnerabilities to an unfiltered, even hostile audience".[6]

Social media technologies can lead to wasted time. In fact, knowledge management pioneer, Tom Davenport, says they are among the greatest time wasters of the age.[7] John Freeman proffers a reason: the simulated busyness of email addiction is actually numbing an inner pain. The internet is not a world unto itself, he reminds us, but a supplement to our existing world. Trading the complicated reality of friendship for a vacuum-packed concept is not a good idea. Context matters, so if electronic communication has stopped providing it, we should turn back to the real world for a solution and *slow down*.[8]

Some feel social media will do irrevocable damage to mainstream media. They fear that newspapers will lay off experts in the face of competition from bloggers. Citizen journalists mainly use, at no cost, regurgitated news from old media. Hardly any of them break news themselves. If mainstream media begins retrenching skilled journalists, the rot will have set in.

In debunking the value of social media, some predict that a preoccupation with it will cause the decline of civilisation. John Freeman laments the fact that we are turning the "once-eloquent art of writing into a behaviour that encourages a torrent of self-absorbed output at the expense of introspection".[9] Ben McIntyre agrees: real storytelling is being drowned out and we are being led into an anorexic form of culture.[10] Andrew Keen, while acknowledging that the web has increased the availability of knowledge hugely in our favour, says the views of the expert do trump the collective wisdom of amateurs: "although it is enticing to believe that online diaries are empowering, the hype is dangerous".[11]

But, if we turn to the internet itself – to Wikipedia – we find a semblance of balance. The internet and social media have made possible entirely new forms of interaction, activities and ways of organising things. They have generated new forms of leisure. They have been successfully used in political campaigning and government communication, in education, in emergencies, in public relations, in gathering opinion, and in space exploration. Jonathan Zittrain, professor of internet law at Harvard Law School, leans towards a positive view: "the qualities that make Twitter seem inane and

---

[5] Fowles J, *The Journals* (vol 1, Vintage, 2004).

[6] Farrelly E, "Exposed: Affairs of the Look-at-me Generation", *Sydney Morning Herald* (9 January 2008).

[7] Davenport T, "Are Social Media Contributing to the Decline of Civilization?" *Harvard Business Review* blog (10 September 2009), http://www.blogs.harvardbusiness.org/davenport/2009/09/are_social_media_contributing.html viewed 10 March 2010.

[8] Freeman J, "Not So Fast" (extract from *Shrinking the World* (Text, October 2009)), *The Weekend Australian Review* (17-18 October 2009) pp 18-19.

[9] Walters C, "Beware the Evils of the Inbox: John Freeman Talks to Conrad Walters", *Sydney Morning Herald Spectrum* (21-22 November 2009) pp 26-27.

[10] McIntyre B, "That's the End of Our Tale", *The Weekend Australian* (7-8 November 2009).

[11] Keen A, *The Cult of the Amateur*, as reported by Keegan V in "The Cacophony of Information Might End Up In Cannibalism", *Sydney Morning Herald* (9 July 2007); and Johnson B, "Worldwide Words: Blogging Turns 10", *Sydney Morning Herald* (10 April 2007).

half-baked are what makes it so powerful".[12] George Megalogenis, in a recent piece about its use in political contexts, sums it up this way: "The content may be banal, but these are the conversations that will define an era and help decide the next election."[13]

Personal habits

Personal habits are changing. In the age of the digital camera, the story of almost everyone can be more easily captured from birth to death. Ordinary people have mounted the same stage as the famous. There are fewer degrees of separation. Websites have replaced gravestones.[14]

In the old days, the famous scribbled away during their lifetime and their jottings were published after their death. If Jane Welsh Carlyle, George Orwell, Philip Larkin and John Fowles had lived in a Web 2.0 world, would their diaries and letters have been as revealing if they had joined Facebook? If the reclusive Stanley Kubrick had been born in 1948 instead of 1928, would he have still left behind the goldmine of his 1,000 boxes? And, if Emily Dickinson had lived between 1986 and 2042, would she have published in her lifetime all 1,775 poems, instead of the seven that reached the public arena before she died in 1886?

Helen Mirren's recent autobiography highlights richness in the way lives are now presented as digitally-produced products. Images in the book – happy snaps and professional photos – are accompanied by pictures of letters, family trees, school compositions, wartime ration cards, houses lived in, theatres performed in, press clippings and travel documents.[15] The biographer has become curator and exhibitor.

Every person has a story to tell. Every town has a Diaspora of prodigal sons and daughters. My own scrapbooks, now with digitised memorabilia, have family trees, the photographs of immigrant antecedents, old houses, old schools, past teachers, fellow students whose names have been forgotten, community theatre programs and influential record covers. But they also contain unique images and text, not yet captured in public institutions, about notable Australian artists, writers and entertainers. A relatively unimportant digital photograph of me in a winning suburban cricket team during the mid-1960s is somehow now retrievable from a regional library via the internet. But a more important photograph of William Dobell at an Awaba children's summer camp during the mid-1950s, taken with my Box Brownie, is only available in my personal scrapbook. Anomalies of significance are no doubt echoed around the country.

Managing personal information employs established principles, processes, values, skills and tools as new products arrive for organising, analysing, evaluating, conveying and securing information and using them to collaborate with others.

The methodical George Washington kept, from the age of 14, every scrap of paper belonging to him and carefully arranged and preserved them. Washington's life, says Paul Johnson, is the best documented of any spent in the entire 18th century, anywhere.[16] Two centuries later, it still comes down to method and tools. Few of us are as organised as Washington. Technology helps us to think structurally – but it also encourages sloppy methods.

William Jones has written that, at the centre of method, is making a decision about what to keep, but making such a decision is fundamentally difficult to do. Too much information can be nearly as bad as too little information. He observed that although we are nearing the limits of what can be done to reduce the costs of keeping information, we have only just begun to explore the potential to reduce the likelihood of keeping mistakes.[17] As Richard Nixon and Godwin Grech discovered, keeping too much information can lead to disaster.

---

[12] "Twitter", *Wikipedia*, http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter viewed 10 March 2010.

[13] Megalogenis G, "Rudd Rides the Digital Age to Dominance", *The Weekend Australian Inquirer* (9-10 January 2010) p 5.

[14] See the websites: John Stringer, http://www.johnstringer.com.au; and Thanks Roy, Remembering Roy Rosenzweig, http://www.thanksroy.org.

[15] Mirren H, *In the Frame: My Life in Words and Pictures* (Phoenix, 2008).

[16] Johnson P, *Heroes, from Alexander the Great to Mae West* (Phoenix, 2009).

[17] Jones W, "Finders, Keepers? The Present and Future Perfect in Support of Personal Information Management" (2004) 9(3)

Catherine Marshall says we flirt with digital brinkmanship. Digital loss has a tendency to be an all-or-nothing proposition. People do not lose just a few of the baby pictures of their first child; they lose *all* of them. She calls for a radical revision of the way we approach personal digital archiving. We need to question casual assumptions about the security and accessibility of information stored in the cloud. We need a combination of services and mechanisms that will make it possible to designate which of our digital things are the most valuable. We need to organise the rest of them into tractable archives that reflect the value of items and not to spend all kinds of extra time taking care of them. While it is seductive to envision a single venue – storage in the cloud – "it is more important to know what we have and where we've put it than it is to centralize all of our stuff into a single repository".[18]

Individuals in organisations

Old notions about public information are changing.

The Australian Government 2.0 Taskforce report and a series of supplementary reports published in 2009 examine the potential use of Web 2.0 technologies by governments, and by extension, other sorts of organisations. Its broad recommendations emphasise leadership, policy and governance to achieve shifts in public sector culture and practice, the application of Web 2.0 collaborative tools and practices, and greater open access to public sector information. This approach will:

> make democracy more participatory and informed, improve the quality and responsiveness of services, deliver services with greater agility and efficiency, unlock the economic and social value of information as a precompetitive platform for innovation, and make government policies and services more responsive to people's needs and concerns.[19]

Some of the supporting documents contain analysis to tempt a devil's advocate.

Economic arguments for implementing change point to existing poor information management practices and to the potential for increased productivity. Professor John Quiggin, one of the project's authors, observes that most Australian cultural institutions, including libraries, archives and museums, have implemented digitisation strategies as "unfunded mandates", and in the face of budget constraints, most have opted for some form of cost recovery, despite the potential for greater social benefit from a free, publicly-financed approach. Our devil's advocate might quibble with this if he has a different view on priorities for taxpayer-funded programs.

On the preservation of Web 2.0 content, the report urged a more expansive view of information management, clearer guidelines for capturing appropriate records from social media, and further exploration of recordkeeping in crowd-sourcing projects and engaging with the cloud. In supporting the proposition that more prominence be given to metadata, it pleaded for a "layered approach" to make up for the lack of comprehensive metadata and for simpler metadata sets to overcome what it calls "metadata paralysis". It also pointed to past recordkeeping failures and it lays some blame at a "lack of leadership by information management professionals in remedying" these failures.

In assessing the report's observations, our devil's advocate might ask whether "metadata paralysis" is real or imagined. He might ask whether "simpler metadata sets" are less important than the application of more rigorous vocabularies. And he might question whether information management professionals are inhibited not so much by their attributes as by other factors. The records management business is more about being methodical than taking great risks. Most information professionals, including record managers, will find leadership a difficult call because, as middle managers, they dance to someone else's tune. In public sector circles, responsibility lies with the CEO.

The taskforce chairman, Nicholas Gruen, in a separate piece about the report, highlighted recent engagement with Web 2.0 opportunities outside the public sector. Firms are successfully adapting

---

First Monday, http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue9_3/jones viewed 10 March 2010.

[18] Marshall C, "Rethinking Personal Digital Archiving, Parts 1-2" (2008) 14(3-4) *D-Lib Magazine*, http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march08/marshall/03marshall-pt1.html viewed 10 March 2010.

[19] Government 2.0 Taskforce, *Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0* (Department of Finance and Deregulation, Australian Government, December 2009), http://www.finance.gov.au/publications/gov20taskforcereport viewed 10 March 2010.

aspects of volunteerism to their own organisational structure, policy formulation, and bureaucratic processes. Formal status is not as important as it was in the past. Google and the software maker Atlassian allow employees to spend one day a week on projects that may bring benefits to the firm. The workers are free to choose. However, although greater recognition of volunteer contributions can create many organic possibilities and unexpected associations, there are productivity questions. Introducing "Google time" by edict into the public service may reduce productivity. The Taskforce report, therefore, has recommended an incremental approach in encouraging staff to experiment and enhance their agencies' worth.[20]

RESPONSES BY CULTURAL HERITAGE INSTITUTIONS

Libraries, archives and museums, if we discount policies and legislation relating to digital recordkeeping by governments, have been gnawing at the problem of dealing with digital lives for the best part of a decade. What are some of the efforts that attempt to advance solutions?

In the United Kingdom

Personal Archives Accessible in Digital Media (PARADIGM, http://www.paradigm.ac.uk) was a JISC-funded project by the university libraries of Oxford and Manchester. It reviewed selected practices of working politicians in the search for ways to harmonise acquisition of digital personal archives with traditional archival processes.

The project report, published in March 2007, makes recommendations revolving around development of roles, skills, standards, and more effective engagement with creators of records. The project workbook has sections on collection development, working with record creators, appraisal and disposal, administrative and preservation metadata, arranging and cataloguing digital and hybrid archives, digital repositories, digital preservation strategies, and legal issues. The appendices include a number of useful tools, such as a model gift agreement, guidelines for creators of personal archives, creating screenshots, capturing directory structures, harvesting websites with Adobe Acrobat Professional 7.0, exporting email from Microsoft Outlook email clients and other useful information.

The Digital Lives Research Project (http://www.bl.uk/digital-lives), set up at the end of 2007 with funds from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, brought together staff from the British Library, University College London and University of Bristol, under the leadership of Dr Jeremy Leighton John.

To address the paucity of research in this area, the project posed a series of questions to guide its work on personal digital collections. What are the implications of digital obsolescence and ephemeral media for the transfer of personal digital collections from individuals to long-term repositories? Do we need to be more proactive? Can we develop better guidance, toolkits and services for individuals to ensure preservation before transfer? Should we explore methods for continuous capture of collections over individual lifetimes? How should we address hybrid personal collections of digital and traditional media? Are there new organisations acting as intermediaries for managing and publishing personal digital collections?

The project held an international conference at the British Library in February 2009. It published a discussion paper by Andrew Charlesworth on the legal and ethical issues in October 2009. A final report, initially due in June 2009, was published in February 2010.[21] The following commentary draws on articles and presentations by Jeremy Leighton John and other project personnel published ahead of the final report.

In an article published in April 2008, reporting the findings of interviews with creators of personal digital collections, John and his colleagues highlighted the high risk of losing "whole swathes of personal, family and cultural memory". Previous research relating to personal information

---

[20] Gruen N, "How Blogging Can Be a Public Service", *Sydney Morning Herald* (18-20 December 2009).

[21] British Library, *The Digital Lives Project Synthesis Report* (2010), http://www.britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/digital_lives viewed 10 March 2010.

management, they noted, had been fragmented by application and device. It had focused on email, the internet and paper electronic retrieval rather than broader issues.[22]

Personal practices associated with managing personal digital archives are extremely complex, they said, and few patterns had emerged from the interviews conducted during the initial stages of the project. There were significant differences in methods and places of storage, familiarity and expertise with hardware and software. There were widespread differences in perceptions about the meaning of personal digital collections and about issues surrounding their preservation. There was widespread misunderstanding about what is created or stored online and what is created or stored offline, particularly email. Some respondents did not know whether their messages were stored on their own computer or remotely. There was also ambiguity about the meaning of "back-up", "storage" and "archive". There were a number of questions to be explored in the remaining term of the project. What do people want and expect to happen to their digital collections at the end of their lives? What motivates people to share digital files during their lives? And which types of files do individuals share (and not share but retain) and in what circumstances?

For curators and archivists, there is unlikely to be a "one-size-fits-all" approach to personal digital collections. It will be important to be able to deal with and advise on multiple storage media and file formats. Recordkeeping tools may be helpful providing they offer flexibility in supporting individual requirements. Educating the creators of digital records on a range of issues will be needed.

In *Adapting Existing Technologies for Digitally Archiving Personal Lives*, John examined technical issues around the transfer of information on superseded media to new media. He explored the use of software and hardware from the forensic, ancestral computer and bioinformatic communities – such as Forensic Toolkit, Macintosh Forensic Suite, Back Track, Coroner's Toolkit and many other applications. It is essential, he said, that we learn not to rely on any single technology for digital capture and to continue the process of exploring, adopting and adapting this technology.[23]

In another more recent article, he and others working on the project, after acknowledging that little is still known about what people do and why they do it, explored an information lifecycle approach.[24]

In the United States

The Online Computer Library Consortium's (OCLC) project, Sharing and Aggregating Social Metadata, focuses on the cloud. Features of social media sites under its scrutiny include the use of tags, controlled vocabularies, comments, annotation and reviews, ratings, lists, images and video, articles, links, filtering and policies. Under the leadership of Karen Smith-Yoshimura, the project includes representatives from universities, public libraries, museums and historical societies, including Rose Holley from the National Library of Australia. Aspects being explored revolve around site objectives, measures of success, best practices, moderation, and attempts by cultural institutions to integrate social metadata into formal taxonomies. A report is anticipated in early 2010.

Smith-Yoshimura, in presentations about the project at the RLG Partners Annual Meeting in June 2009 and the OCLC Digital West Forum in September 2009, offered preliminary observations on work already undertaken:[25]

---

[22] Williams P, Dean K, Rowlands I and John JL, "Digital Lives: Report of Interviews with the Creators of Personal Digital Collections" (2008) 55 *Ariadne*, http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue55/williams-et-al viewed 10 March 2010.

[23] John JL, "Adapting Existing Technologies for Digitally Archiving Personal Lives: Digital Forensics, Ancestral Computing, and Evolutionary Perspectives" (Proceedings of *The Fifth International Conference on Preservation of Digital Objects Joined Up and Working: Tools and Methods for Digital Preservation*, London, 29-30 September 2008), http://www.bl.uk/ipres2008/ipres2008-proceedings.pdf viewed 10 March 2010.

[24] Williams P, John J and Rowland I, "The Personal Curation of Digital Objects: A Lifecycle Approach" (2009) 61(4) *Aslib Proceedings* 340, http://www.emeraldinsight.com/10.1108/00012530910973767 viewed 10 March 2010.

[25] *RLG Partners Annual Meeting* (Boston, June 2009), http://www.oclc.org/research/events/2009-06-01a.htm viewed 10 March 2010; and *OCLC Digital West Forum* – "Convergence: Where Metadata and Access Meet for Digital Discovery and Delivery" (Los Angeles, September 2009), http://www.oclc.org/western/digitalforum/default.htm viewed 10 March 2010.

- There are a great variety of sites.
- Success appears to be tied to the objective and the type of audience, not necessarily traffic – they appear to be of value in leveraging a "sense of community".
- Some sites are heavily moderated, others are not moderated.
- Institution-specific sites have fewer contributions than aggregate sites.
- Tags contributed at network level are of more value.
- Tagging is most useful when there is no existing metadata.
- Success depends on a critical mass and a sense of community.
- Some promising areas include the use of sites like Flickr to identify "mystery photos" and provide context, CommentPress for translating, transcribing digitised documents in different languages and scripts, and the integration of user corrections, as used in Flickr commons, Minnesota Historical Society's WOTR (Write on the Record) site, and the UK National Archives site – Your Archives.

The list of social metadata sites being reviewed by the working group can be viewed at: http://www.oclcresearch.webjunction.org/social_metadata. Among the sites are prominent services like Amazon, Flickr Commons and Wikipedia. International library, archive and museum sites and projects include the British Library's Archival Sound Recordings, Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections, Science Museum of Minnesota's Science Buzz, The Social OPAC, Steve (the Museum Social Tagging Project), Ancestry's World Archives Project, and WorldCat. Australian and New Zealand sites include Archives New Zealand Audio Visual Wiki, the National Library of Australia's Argus Index 1870-1879, Auckland War Memorial Museum's Cenotaph Database, the Australian Newspapers beta, Historic Australian Newspapers 1803-1954, Digital NZ, Mariners and Ships in Australian Waters (State Records NSW), Auckland Museum's Memory Maker site, Picture Australia, the Powerhouse Museum, and State Library of Queensland.

In addition to these sites, investigators of the subject may be interested in: Archives Outside (http://www.archivesoutside.records.nsw.gov.au); Now and Then (http://www.nowandthen.net.au), a site that gathers material about the small South Australian township of Mallala; and Museum of Victoria's site, Collectish (http://www.collectish.com).

In July 2009, the Library of Congress National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program launched a pilot program to test cloud technologies for preserving digital content. The pilot will focus on a new service, DuraCloud, to be developed and hosted by the DuraSpace Foundation. The New York Public Library and the Biodiversity Heritage Library are among participants. The test will cover both storage and access services, including services that span multiple cloud storage providers. The program will focus on providing trusted solutions for organisations such as universities, libraries, cultural heritage organisations, research centres and others who are concerned with ensuring perpetual access to their digital content.[26]

In February 2010, the Internet Archive organised a conference on personal archiving and has established a website (http://www.personalarchiving.com) to attract further conversations on the subject.

In Australia

Another Australian site listed by OCLC Group is the Community Created Content Project of National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA, http://www.nsla.org.au/projects/rls/community-created-content), a project in NSLA's strategic plan *Re-imagining Libraries* with programs relating to e-resources, virtual reference, document supply, new work environments, collaborative collecting, collection management, economic issues, and metadata. The Community Created Content Project sets out to develop a sustainable framework for individuals and communities to build personalised digital library spaces where they can create, tag and protect content and share it with family, peers and groups and feed that content into community, institutional and preservation repositories.

---

[26] Digital Preservation, *Preservation in the Cloud* (Library of Congress, 23 July 2009), http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/news/2009/20090723news_article_duracloud.html viewed 10 March 2010.

As an initial step Paul Reynolds, Adjunct Director of the National Library of New Zealand and Managing Director of McGovern Online, has produced the discussion paper *NSLA Project Five: The Project @ April*. This proposed a set of online tools and web services designed to leverage knowledge assets within the web ecology by enabling the assembly of personalised library customer web spaces and sharing information in these spaces.

These tools consist of four stations:

- A source station will give users the ability "to manage, store, subscribe and direct their own ecology of web information and web sources".
- A search station will deliver "search and discovery features based on customised user profiles to allow them to search and retrieve the rich set of sources available from the open and subscription-based deep web".
- A social station will give every library user in Australia and New Zealand a social networking space which will offer the ability "to participate in a rich collaborative digital public space that can be shared with other social networking spaces".
- A remix station will give the user "the ability to create a personalised user/group creative studio where the user uploads, co-creates, shares and remixes to the world".

NSLA is currently working on a presentation tool to assist in building a community of practice relating to the project, establishing a web space and development of the toolkit. Resourcing requirements will be submitted to the NSLA members for endorsement at the NSLA meeting in March 2010.

Other international deliberations

At the RLG Partnership Annual Meeting in June 2009, several presentations caught my eye for their relevance in dealing with personal digital collections and activity in the cloud. Karen Smith-Yoshimura and Thomas Hickey, in *Names and Identities*, reported on the Networking Names Advisory Group's work on a cooperative identities hub and framework "to concatenate all forms of names using a social networking model". Hickey and Ed O'Neill spoke about the Virtual International Authority File (VIAF), a service to provide free access to the world's major authority files, as one of the building blocks for the Semantic Web. Penny Carnaby (National Library of New Zealand), in *Going Global*, flagged possible changes to roles when outlining how national libraries can work together with academic libraries, archives and museums. And Diane Vizine-Goetz spoke about OCLC's Terminology Services, which aim to make the terms and relationship in controlled vocabularies available as web resources.

At OCLC Digital Forum West in September 2009, Jonathan Furner, in *Twenty Tall Tales About Tagging*, questioned widespread views about tagging, a field of enquiry that tends to be based on opinion rather than evidence. Anne Gilliland, in *Increasing Digital Discovery and Delivery*, urged us to make more out of metadata, including the use of expert-created metadata. And Luis Mendes, in *Out of the Mouths of Users into Library Systems*, put forward the case for the continued development of tags and controlled vocabularies as complementary systems.

Additional issues have been exposed in other recent conferences. From the IPRES Conference in October 2009 (http://www.cdlib.org/iPres), Jens Ludwig's *Into the Archive: Potential and Limits of Standardizing the Ingest* deals with the complexity of ingesting digital material, work underway, and possible future steps. Maureen Pennock's *ArchivePress: A Really Simple Solution to Archiving Blog Content* provides an update on research by British institutions on significant properties of blogs and the development of related open source plug-ins. Johanna Smith and Pam Armstrong (Library and Archives Canada) talked about the influence and collaboration with record creators in preserving the digital memory of the Government of Canada in *Are You Ready?*

The DigCCurr 2009 conference, part of a three-year project funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, focused on the need to improve graduate level programs for professional training in digital curation.[27] One of the presenters, Andreas Rauber, demonstrated HOPPLA (Home

---

[27] Tibbo HR et al (eds), *Digital Curation: Practice, Promise & Prospects, Proceedings of DigCCurr 2009* (University of North

and Office Painless Persistent Long-term Archiving, http://www.ifs.tuwien.ac.at/dp/hoppla), which is under development at the University of Technology, Vienna. This system will offer back-up and automated migration services in personal data collections and SOHO (Solo Office Home Office) settings. The project is exploring system design requirements and professional development needs.

SUMMING UP

Social media are like other media. Quality floats on a sea of dross. As George Steiner observed, many tongues are better than one voice:

> The true catastrophe of Babel is not the scattering of tongues. It is the reduction of human speech to a handful of planetary, "multinational" tongues. The reduction, formidably fuelled by the mass market and information technology, is now reshaping the globe.[28]

New channels have led to more dynamic connections in a more diverse marketplace, but have they transformed democracy? Socrates, Plato and Aristotle probably would be unconvinced. They preferred filters to counterbalance the tyranny of the majority and the excesses of the powerful. John Fowles points to a paradox of democracy: "[It] tries to give choice to as many people as possible, and this is its saving virtue; but the wider the franchise and the larger the population grows the sharper becomes the irony."[29] John Ralston Saul lays down a trump card about Web 2.0 technologies in his view of democracy:

> [It] is an existential system in which words are more important than actions. Democracy is not intended to be efficient, linear, logical, cheap, the source of absolute truth, manned by angels, saints or virgins, profitable, the justification for any particular economic system, a simple matter or majority rule or for that matter a simple matter of majorities…Democracy is the only system capable of reflecting the humanistic premise of equilibrium or balance. The key to its secret is the involvement of the citizen.[30]

Irrespective of the value and characteristics of social media, libraries, archives and museums are obliged to take action in a rapidly expanding world of personal digital material.

Over 100 years ago, Charles Francis Adams and his colleagues at the Massachusetts Historical Society were not only faced with the same dilemma, they knew some of the answers:

> The question of the future, so far as the material of history is concerned, relates to the getting at what has been accumulated – the ready extraction of the marrow. In other words, it is a problem of differentiation, selection, arrangement, indexing and cataloguing. Today we are men wandering in a vast wilderness, which is springing up in every direction with tropical luxuriance. The one great necessity is to have paths carried through it in some kind of intelligible plan [that] will enable us to find our way wither we would go, or to tell us in what direction research would be futile.[31]

In 1984, F Gerald Ham had much the same idea:

> The age of overabundant records and information, combined with scarcity of resources, is forcing archivists to replace the essentially unplanned with a systematic, documented process of building, maintaining and preserving collections.[32]

Twenty years ago, David Bearman, among others, drew our attention to the fact that management of digital information involves a transfer of responsibility from the archival gravediggers to the midwives who create digital material. Everyone with a computer has become an archivist. For collecting institutions, risk management is the name of the game.

Yet, in 2008, Neal Beagrie and others argue that we still do not treat digital preservation seriously enough. Their research focused on the higher education sector in the United Kingdom, but their

---

Carolina, April 2009), http://www.ils.unc.edu/digccurr2009 viewed 10 March 2010.

[28] Steiner G, *My Unwritten Books* (Phoenix, 2008).

[29] Fowles J, *The Aristos* (rev ed, Triad Granada, 1980).

[30] Saul JR, *The Doubter's Companion: A Dictionary of Aggressive Common Sense* (Penguin Books, 1995).

[31] Adams CF, *Historians and Historical Societies: An Address Opening the Fenway Building of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (13 April 1899), http://www.jstor.org/stable/60226458 viewed 10 March 2010.

[32] Ham FG, *Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance* (edited by Peace N, DC Heath, 1984) pp 11-22.

---

findings point to the situation on a wider front. There are relatively few digital preservation policies within institutions. The costs of developing a coherent sustainable approach are largely unexplored. Institutions must begin to see digital preservation as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself: "Any digital preservation policy must be framed in terms of the key business drivers and strategies of the institution."[33]

Lorcan Dempsey urges us to differentiate between concentration of data and its diffusion. They are complementary approaches. Scale matters. You cannot simply add social networking to a site and expect it to work well. Much of the library discussion of Web 2.0 is about diffusion. Diffusion tools create fragmentation. Data needs to be concentrated above the individual library level.[34]

Francine Berman highlights the need for approaches on data preservation to be "useful, usable, cost-effective, and unremarkable". She proposes a "Branscomb Pyramid model" in which data is tiered off according to its societal, community and individual value. Each level is in search of a different solution and a different body in charge.[35]

Every age faces its own nightmares. Today's social media technology is the new telephone, a new tool for collaboration, and a new force for both productive effort and diversion.

Cultural heritage institutions, in responding to the challenges of today's Tower of Babel, will need to be open to change and exercise imagination, but they will also find new recipes in old common sense. Some things they will be able to control. Other things will be, as they always have been, in the lap of the gods.

---

[33] Beagrie N, Rettberg N and Williams P, "Digital Preservation Policy: A Subject of No Importance?" (*IPRES: The International Conference on Preservation of Digital Objects*, London, September 2008), http://www.bl.uk/ipres2008/programme.html viewed 10 March 2010.

[34] Dempsey L, "The Two Ways of Web 2.0 – Retread", *Lorcan Dempsey's Weblog* (20 December 2009), http://www.orweblog.oclc.org/archives/002035.html viewed 10 March 2010.

[35] Berman F, "Got Data? A Guide to Data Preservation in the Information Age" (2008) 51(12) *Communications of the ACM* 50, http://www.doi.acm.org/10.1145/1409360.1409376 viewed 10 March 2010.