Rediscovering historic Wollongong - a community and educational collaboration project

Rebecca Daly  
*University of Wollongong, rdaly@uow.edu.au*

Susan Jones  
*University of Wollongong, susanj@uow.edu.au*

John Shipp  
*Illawarra Historical Society Museum*

Lisa Matuselis  
*Wollongong City Library*

Marisa O’Connor  
*Wollongong City Library*

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Abstract
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Rebecca Daly, University of Wollongong

Susan Jones, University of Wollongong

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Lisa Matuzelis, Wollongong City Library

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Abstract

In 2014, three prominent Wollongong cultural institutions: the University of Wollongong Library, Wollongong City Library and the Illawarra Historical Society, formalised a joint agreement to undertake a collaborative project to digitise important and commonly requested historical materials held within each of the organisations. The collaborative project resulting from this agreement has been responsible for the digitisation of significant local publications such as the Illawarra Historical Society Bulletin, and planning for an online exhibition of content in contextualised formats based on geographic areas and relevant local themes. Through pooling expertise, metadata, content and systems, the project group has been able to maximise the capacity of otherwise siloed and limited resources to deliver sophisticated online collections and content delivery. This project demonstrates the value of joining forces with other local organisations who are often seeking to achieve the same digital content aims, thus reducing duplication, effort, and at the same time building relationships for future collaborative endeavours or mutual support.

Introduction

Cultural and heritage organisations of all sizes are becoming increasingly aware that their ongoing relevance and perceived value, indeed their life expectancy, is contingent on the ability to embrace digital content creation and delivery. Adopting methods to expand the reach and highlight the educational aspects of cultural collections to global audiences is one of the goals of archives, museums and libraries. Due to the logistics and cost of digitisation projects, it can be difficult for small organisations or those who have yet to develop in-house skills to commence even a small program. The technical hurdles in acquiring and managing a website, digitising, hosting and providing search tools is out of the range of many organisations’ independent economic capacity.

Collaborative endeavour provides the opportunity to build rich and meaningful collections by pooling staff knowledge, technical resources and material assets. This paper demonstrates how the Wollongong collaborative project between the Illawarra Historical Society, Wollongong City Library and University of Wollongong Library will extend each organisation’s capacity and avenues for making content discoverable and accessible for community and school users. Through collaboration, these organisations have been able to combine: resources, expertise, content, staff, and equipment, to produce valuable outcomes for clients, and open up access to each organisation’s collections.
Digitisation and collaboration

Collaborative digitisation is not a new concept. Manzuch (2011) argues that contemporary libraries build networks as a means to achieve their goals with limited funds. Libraries, museums and galleries have for years collaborated with other organisations and commercial entities to achieve goals that, for a number of reasons, are difficult to complete without the support of partners. The cost of digitisation projects is often significant, due to the extent of resources required: staff time, training, systems and software, format shifting, outsourcing, equipment and storage. Yet, it is currently widely acknowledged that developing a digital collection of unique physical resources is one of the most effective methods for increasing exposure to, and accessibility of, collections.

Global, large-scale projects have been well documented in the literature. Europeana and the World Digital Library are just some examples of where not-for-profit organisations are supporting member libraries in the digitisation, hosting and/or dissemination of their content within large online portals. Less well documented are the many small community-based projects that deliver substantial outcomes to a wide range of users.

In the United States, the Collaborative Digitisation Program (CDP) was established in Colorado in 1998 and expanded nationally to provide a nexus for “cultural heritage organizations of all kinds” (Allen 2004) to undertake digitisation of their special collections. The CDP provided logistical support, such as metadata creation, copyright management, and coordination of the digitisation process itself. This service could be provided due to funding delivered in support of the Library Services and Technology Act, which encourages libraries to share resources to promote preservation and access to library content in all formats (Institute of Museum and Library Services 2014). The Act is still in force; while CDP no longer exists, it provided the catalyst and conditions that have resulted in a wealth of digital content now available through libraries across the United States.

The Center for Research Libraries digitisation programs pools resources from its 212 members to “identify, preserve and expand access to critical research materials” (CRL 2014). Similar to the National Library of Australia’s Newspaper Digitisation Program, CRL works with members, dedicated CRL advisory groups, and other institutions internationally to identify and digitise collections of value to the membership. The CRL projects, World Newspaper Archive and the Brazilian Government Document Digitization Project, are closed access and open access collections respectively.

Collaboration across educational institutions is common in the US. For example, the Digital Library of the Caribbean (2014) is now celebrating its tenth year. This consortium includes two Florida universities and other institutions within the Caribbean, many of who developed their first skills in digital resource creation as part of the project (Sullivan and Ochoa, 2009, p. 250). The METRO project is another large scale undertaking utilising a funding support model provided by the New York State Library to the 270 METRO member libraries in New York City and Westchester County (Anon., 2005; Metropolitan New York Library Council, 2014). Since 2005, the project has provided nearly $USD700,000 in funding to sixty-one projects.

In the UK, Jisc and the British Library have both played pivotal roles in supporting large scale digitisation programs. In 2000, with Jisc funding, the British Library instituted the
EThOS online thesis request service “under a shared-service arrangement” (Jenkins, 2012). This service delivers a union catalogue of all theses produced in universities within the UK, with e-commerce functionality for request, purchase and desktop delivery. EThOS is a service as well as a program, where client purchases are used to fund the digitisation of requested content (British Library, 2014).

Collaborative digitisation projects at the local level often have a regional focus, yet can offer significant research undertakings. These smaller scale projects provide an opportunity for participating organisations to create, share and learn digitisation practices. Yeates and Guy (2006) presented a study on the Sense of Place South East (SoPSE) collaborative digitisation project which commenced in 2001 and resulted in an online exhibition of historical content, stories and ‘games’ related to the area. The collaboration comprised five organisations, supported by government grant funding. This study is worth a closer look for those seeking to undertake a collaborative project as it provides a candid insight as to how partners had to work ‘from scratch’ to plan, implement and manage the digitisation program. They worked through a range of issues, from achieving a shared technological infrastructure, forming governance and advisory groups, determining standards and metadata management, to resourcing, preservation, developing priorities and identifying content. The collaboration saw an opportunity to build skills, ensure quality and provide other benefits in these areas to member institutions.

Like the SoPSE project, collaboration based on delivering regional or community benefits may have an inherent requirement for enhancing “the region’s cultural heritage, sense of place and a feeling of local pride and community identity” (Yeates and Guy, 2006, p. 141). This is often the case with local digitisation collaborations, which are driven by a need to undertake what Manzuch (2011) refers to as their ‘social mission’ within their community. Of note, the SoPSE project group identified the necessity for “cultural institutions to go beyond the provision of mere databases of disparate objects and intellectual items, to create compelling navigational and learning experiences for end-users” (Yeates and Guy, 2006, p. 139). In other words, the project should endeavour to make content accessible in meaningful ways; a key principle driver of the Wollongong project. The use of web tools, systems and design can be used to shape and structure information in forms suited to learning and engagement. The opportunities presented by the internet and the range of online tools now freely available, remove some of the former barriers to organisations for hosting and delivering content. Through the harnessing of such tools, cultural institutions need only the will, creativity, expertise and content to engage clients in digital collections.

In Australia, a number of local collaborative digitisation initiatives have been undertaken. State Libraries, in particular, are often key stakeholders in these projects. The Local History Digitisation Project was developed by the State Library of Victoria as a resource and contact to aid public libraries in commencing digitisation programs (State Library of Victoria 2001). The State Library of Victoria has completed joint digitisation projects with commercial, sports and historical organisations to deliver access to digital resources related to that local area (State Library of Victoria 2014). The State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW) has undertaken a number of collaborative projects recently, including the following projects of note: the Macquarie Papers collection jointly digitised with Macquarie University; the Dictionary of Sydney, an online resource developed in partnership with the University of Sydney and the City of Sydney; and the Register of War Memorials in New South Wales, a joint initiative between the Library, Clubs NSW, the Returned Servicemen’s League and
government. State Libraries are often driven by organisational missions to provide equitable access to content through collaborative opportunities (for example, see State Library of New South Wales 2014). These collaborations can be with the public library sector and historical associations, but can also extend to business, government and others stakeholders with a vested interest in the curation of unique collections.

The Wollongong Partnership

Wollongong has an interesting geographical and social context. The city is located 80 kilometres south of Sydney and occupies a narrow plain edged by a high escarpment to the west and the sea to the east. This geography affected the way in which the area developed. Coal was discovered in the northern part of the district and villages evolved around the individual mines. Over time these villages merged and became the northern suburbs of Wollongong. The topography south of Wollongong was more suited to farming and was also favourable to the development of heavy industry at Port Kembla. These industries attracted large number of migrant workers in the years after World War 2 and fostered the growth of Wollongong from a small coastal town into a city with a very diverse cultural identity.

Presenting historical information in a manner that allows users to recognise and relate to particular local elements more readily, for example the inclusion of “then and now” streetscape images, encourages people to engage with their own local history in increasingly contextualised and personalised ways. Wollongong’s geographical location and distinct regional history provided an opportunity for collaboration between the Wollongong City Library, Illawarra Historical Society and Museum, and the University of Wollongong Library to facilitate this type of engagement and importantly to develop new sources of packaged, integrated content.

The collaborative digitisation project in Wollongong, originated from the independent recognition across the three institutions that the public appetite for digital local history resources was growing and that each organisation was doing what it could to support the availability of its own resources, with variable budget support. Ties between the three organisations had existed for many years, particularly in the area of history reference services. Links between the UOW Archives, the Historical Society, and the City Library’s Local Studies section, were enduring and have supported the growth of knowledge and experience of local collections, activities, and researchers.

It became clear, that each institution had particular strengths to contribute to the project:

*Illawarra Historical Society and Illawarra Museum.* Established in 1945, the Illawarra Historical Society (IHS) is dedicated to the preservation and promotion of local history and heritage. The Society counts former archivists, researchers, and librarians amongst its members. It operates the Illawarra Museum which includes a collection of 19th and 20th century domestic, industrial, military and agricultural artefacts housed within edifice heritage listed building. In addition, the Museum holds a wealth of other material, such as documents, that have been donated by the community. The Museum is operated by volunteers and funded through the receipt of donations, memberships, and entry fees to the Museum. As the only museum of its kind locally, it is a popular site for tours by schools and other local groups, as well as tourists. In 2014, the Museum’s website underwent a much-needed redesign and rejuvenation to increase its reach and impact, and to enable potential inclusion
of new technologies for sharing information and resources. The Historical Society is a prominent publisher of seminal works on Illawarra history, most of which are not digitally available, as well as the IHS Bulletin, which has been released since 1945.

**University of Wollongong Library.** UOW Library has served the UOW community for more than forty years. The Library houses the University Archives, which captures and preserves content related to the corporate and social history of the University as well as historical material on the local Illawarra region. The Archives staff provide specialised reference services to staff and students, as well as to members of the wider community. In 2011, the Library introduced a digitisation program primarily driven by a need to unlock the physical barriers to content held in the Archives. Daly and Organ (2014) describe the development of the program as it is currently structured. The digitisation program is supported by staff from both the Archives and Scholarly Content team in the Library. Digital content is made available to the world via the Library’s Digital Collections portal, which guides users to content held within the Research Online (using Bepress’s Digital Commons platform) and UOW Archives Online (Content Pro) systems.

**Wollongong City Library.** Wollongong City Library was established in the late 1940’s. The Local Studies section of the Library was formed in 1960 and began as a small collection housed in the Reference Librarian’s office and only accessible to staff. In the early years, items (books, maps and photos) on loan from the Illawarra Historical Society formed a major part of the collection. Wollongong City Library is the central library in a network of six, stretching from Dapto in the south, to Helensburgh in the north. The City Library has a strong history of engagement with the Wollongong community, particularly in the area of Local Studies. This has been most recently evidenced by the development of the *Illawarra Remembers* website, a project which entailed digitising historical material owned by community members relating to the Great War. Through this project, the City Library has been able to capture and convey the stories of local soldiers and their families, and revive the act of remembrance for their actions.

In terms of digitisation practices, the City Library preceded its two partners by several years. Released in 1999, the *Illawarra Images* database provides open access to thousands of digitised historical images of local people, places and events; aligned to the Library’s goal of documenting the life of the Wollongong community, building awareness of the stories of local people, and making them accessible to the wider community. The City Library has a well-developed index of local publications – the *Illawarra Index* – which is a valuable source of metadata on articles, books and other content published about the Illawarra. This metadata strength is a key contributor to the project.

**The Wollongong Project**

The three organisations initiated the project to pull together best copies of estate and subdivision plans, land title deeds, historical publications and photographs from each organisation’s collection, and present them in a way that digitally reframes and enriches stories of the past for use by researchers, community members and local school students.

The subject matter was chosen based on three criteria: a recognised demand for materials and stories by prominent client groups; the fact that much of the content was not digitally available at the time; and that there were duplicate holdings across the organisations. It was
also recognised that each organisation did not have the independent means to build a complete online presence for this content, and that a collaborative approach to digitising it would benefit all involved.

The contribution the project is expected to make to educational programs in local schools demonstrates the potential value of the undertaking. Digital frameworks will provide a contemporary and sustainable approach for the City Library, the Museum and the University to introduce their historical collections to large numbers of primary and secondary school students, many of whom may go on to further studies at the University. Students will be offered new, independently facilitated opportunities to engage with and utilise resources within their current studies, at a time and place convenient to them; rather than being constrained by the restriction of opening hours offered by each of the physical entities.

The project commenced in July 2014, with an aim of achieving digital delivery of its primary undertaking by July 2015. The project steering committee comprises the Archivist and the Manager Scholarly Content from UOW Library, the Coordinator, Local Studies and the Librarian, Local Studies from the City Library, and the Manager of the Illawarra Museum. The group meets monthly, rotating the meeting venue and facilitation role between each organisation.

Table 1 outlines a summary of the group’s project plan for the one year term of the project. The first six months have focused on several small projects identified as essential to the aim, including the digitisation of the large run of the IHS *Bulletin*, which has been published monthly since 1945. Other tasks have included digitisation of a range of commonly referenced IHS monograph publications; determining the thematic boundaries of the project and developing a plan for its online presence; and identifying other content to support the exhibition of this content.

Table 1. Detail from collaborative local history group project plan.

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<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Finalised</th>
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<tr>
<td>Complete issues of the <em>Bulletin</em> archived on the Illawarra Museum’s website.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Digitisation and online availability of select Illawarra Historical Society publications.</td>
<td>December 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Determine the local areas and themes that will be the basis for online ‘stories’ comprising collections of historical resources.</td>
<td>January 2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop a plan for the structure, function and development of the online stories, and support needed to achieve this.</td>
<td>January 2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify and digitise other resources, such as land title deeds, subdivision plans and images, that will contribute to the online stories.</td>
<td>March 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Launch of online presence.</td>
<td>July 2015</td>
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Due to its value as a source of local history research, the digitisation of the large-run IHS *Bulletin* became the first project task. The monthly, then bi-monthly *Bulletin*, usually includes
one or two articles written by local researchers and historians on narrowly defined topics, such as the history of local places, buildings, people, events and so forth. The Wollongong City Library has provided catalogue records of articles from the entire run of the Bulletin through their Illawarra Index database since 2005. This has been the primary point of discovery for clients wishing to search Bulletin content. The Index directed users to print copies of the Bulletin held primarily at the City Library, but also at the Illawarra Museum and the UOW Library. The project group aimed to provide digital copies of Bulletin articles to facilitate access to the content for the community and, by default, reduce the role of Museum and Library staff as mediators to physical materials. The Bulletin articles were also recognised as a treasure trove of content for building the online presence, the final deliverable of the project, because its subject matter covers a large range of the Illawarra history.

The digitisation of the IHS Bulletin has been a truly collaborative experience. With metadata sourced from the City Library, content sourced from the Museum, and digitisation and hosting undertaken by the University Library, the project group has blended and leveraged expertise and knowledge to build an online presence rather quickly (See Illawarra Historical Society reference). Issues around metadata and presentation were discussed within the project group; these included: what metadata to include and how to transfer it, how to link between each organisation’s website, how to present article content digitally, and what to include.

It was decided that the University’s Research Online service would host the Bulletin content and other publications because it utilises the Bepress Digital Commons repository platform which contains functionality for hosting journal, book and series content, and is OAI-PMH compliant for advanced visibility and discoverability (Bepress 2014). Each article will receive its own record, downloadable PDF and an embedded text viewer enabling clients to read the article within the browser. All metadata for the articles is to be drawn from the Illawarra Index. The full issues of the Bulletin will be archived on the Society’s website, and links between both sites would be put in place.

The regional distinctiveness of our organisational purviews is also reflected in the content that our organisations curate, archive and preserve. For this reason, the group decided to take a geographical approach to the design of an online ‘exhibition’ or display for the content that would pull digitised materials together to create thematic narratives, ‘stories’. For example, uniting articles, images, books, documents and other content about a suburb, event or person, thus enhancing research value. The development of the online ‘space’ is the final deliverable for the project. To ensure a distributed and balanced approach to building the online space, a framework has been established that will guide its design. Figure 1 illustrates the structure which is based on the three broad areas of the Illawarra - North, South and Central – and the five thematic groupings which broadly define the historical development of the region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northern Illawarra</th>
<th>Central Illawarra</th>
<th>Southern Illawarra</th>
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<td>1 Labour and industry</td>
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Figure 1. Planned geographic and thematic structure of the online presence.

The project group has agreed on three considerations in building the online presence. Firstly, the structure of the site (wireframes, content and other design elements) should be documented separately in case of future design or technical obsolescence. Secondly, freely available online tools should be used wherever possible to reduce staff workloads, optimise the advanced design and delivery functions that many of these tools include and, therefore, ensure the ongoing appeal and usability of the site to clients. Examples of such tools include Google Open Galleries, Pinterest and History Pin. Thirdly, the site text and branding should relay the joint nature of the project. The design phase is now commenced based on these three considerations, and the geographic and thematic framework.

The initial success of the project will be measured in a number of ways, including:

- Website traffic and use of digitised content
- Affect of the de-duplication of services across the group
- Client feedback and satisfaction with the ease of discovery of sought after content

Conclusion

A collaboration between multiple organisations presents challenges as well as rewards. Different organisations inevitably bring to the project the influence of their independent organisational cultures, goals, processes and client base. The Wollongong project group were fortunate, in that many of the group members had worked with or liaised with each other for many years, and their expertise and knowledge of local history resources was vast. Ensuring availability of resources to support the project can be challenging, though the broader nature of a collaborative endeavour widens the range of opportunities available. The group has ensured the equitable input of all members through the pooling of resources, particularly related to each organisation’s strengths, and allowing shared hosting and facilitation of project meetings. Importantly, the group is committed to recognising and supporting the prioritisation of digitised information and content as determined by their clientele.

The online presence will be the final deliverable of the project. The group recognise the need for continuing relevance and up-to-date design of the online presence and, for this reason, will take advantage of the range of free tools available online that simplify the exhibition of content. The collaborative project between University of Wollongong Library, Wollongong City Library and the Illawarra Historical Society has helped build and solidify relationships between these organisations, and paved the way for future opportunities of enduring benefit to local researchers, community members and students.

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