SAFEGUARDING ACCESS: COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS AND ACCESS TO ONLINE AND LOCAL SOURCES

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Introduction

I would like to thank the Records Management Association of Australasia for giving me the opportunity to present this paper today.

The strand that this paper contributes to at this conference is ‘Safeguarding community identities’ and my interest is in access. There are various ways institutions and individual recordkeeping professionals engage in safeguarding access. My paper deals with how communities outside the recordkeeping profession looking in perceive the ideals of access to records and how access is provided. How do they understand access and how and where do they expect to be able to access records, in particular government records?

The public reaction to the announcement in November last year by the National Archives of Australia (NAA) was sustained, visible and effective: it also demonstrated that there was community interest beyond the boundaries of the recordkeeping profession in access to records. These ‘community expectations’ may not have been apparent or articulated before that time, but they were there. As a longstanding practitioner with a strong interest in access issues and as someone with a background in researching collective action and social protest, I decided to incorporate study of the ‘Stop the closures’ campaign into my research on access. I am not proposing to tell the whole story of the campaign against the NAA closures today, but rather to use it as a way of exploring community expectations about access.

What do we mean by community expectations?

Since the mid 1990s with the development of AS4390 through the work of our leading Australian practitioners, community expectations have been incorporated into in our professional vocabulary. They are usually associated with ‘external’ involvement in the
appraisal process through consultation. Yet the recognition of ‘community expectations’ extends beyond this. The list of principles for records management programs in ISO 15489 includes the following: ‘preserving records and making them accessible over time, in order to meet business requirements and community expectations’.¹

Nevertheless ‘community expectations’ is a rather nebulous concept, as Stephen Yorke found in his attempt ten years ago to pin down community expectations and their possible role in appraisal. We can’t really argue when he says: ‘...the community at large has no expectations about records or at best has very little interest in records’.² However, Stephen also acknowledges that the wider public has been significant in securing the future of some archives:

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[there are a]demonstrable number of archival institutions and archival collections that do in fact exist and, ultimately, could only continue to exist because of some form of active community expectations for their continued existence.³
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There is now a definition in the recordkeeping literature. **Community expectations** appears in the glossary of Standards Australia’s *Recordkeeping Compliance Handbook* [HB278] published last year. The words of the definition are: ‘A widely held view of acceptable or appropriate practice in relation to recordkeeping’⁴. This definition does not bring us closer to who the community is, but it does indicate that widely held views about recordkeeping exist.

There have been other attempts to describe ‘community’ in relation to recordkeeping. One of the activities in the workshops for the review of the joint ASA-RMAA Statement of Knowledge for Recordkeeping Professionals (held last year in conjunction with the RMAA and ASA conferences) was to define ‘community’ to identify perspectives beyond government and business. Many different institutions, organisations and informal groups
were identified and the diversity of ‘community’ interests in recordkeeping was underlined. Another way we understand contemporary society is to see it as a plurality of communities expressing their views alongside each other, some existing within larger ones. So it is with community expectations and access to archives. Actual users of archives – whether online or local (in-person) – are only a sub-set of the general community here. User expectations are to some extent known. Users are sometimes represented on formal consultative bodies; their views are sought and are monitored by institutions and discussed in the professional literature. Later in the paper I will focus on user expectations: they are our most immediate ‘external’ community and are among the actors in the records continuum’s fourth dimension. The expectations of the wider community or communities who may not use archives now, but could potentially do so, are more elusive and less understood than those of the user community.

**What do we mean by access?**

*Access* is defined as ‘[The] right, opportunity, means of finding, using, or retrieving information’ in the International Standard on Records Management. The loss of access for the public, more than the withdrawal of services to Commonwealth agencies located in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Tasmania, galvanised the protests against the foreshadowed closures of the NAA offices. The petition listed five separate concerns:

- The announcement of the closure of the Adelaide, Darwin and Hobart offices of the National Archives of Australia starting in less than 10 months with the Darwin office
- The contradiction between this announcement and the service stated to be provided to the public in the National Archives of Australia’s Service Charter, viz: “We have reading rooms in each capital city in Australia where you can research the Commonwealth records held there.”
- The contradiction between the announcement and the Government’s commitment to more openness in government as stated on the website of Prime Minister and Cabinet in relation to changes to the Freedom of Information regime
The disadvantage this imposes on the people of those states and Northern Territory, not least to indigenous people who are part of the Stolen Generation, and on child migrants, so recently acknowledged by the Prime Minister, who attempt to trace their family;

- The withdrawal of the help pledged by the National Archives of Australia to “Australian Government agencies [to] create and manage their records” to those agencies in South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory.

Figure 1: Text of petition to the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives, November 2009.

Circulating a petition may seem an old-fashioned way of expressing dissent against a government’s actions, but in this case it was very effective. Email and the determination of many individuals and organisations to show their opposition to the proposed closures made sure that a widespread campaign emerged very quickly. Organisations which circulated the petition to their members included genealogical societies, historical societies, associations of historians and history teachers and branches of the National Trust. Staff of public and state libraries, universities, museums, art galleries, state and local government agencies, schools and many different archives signed the petition. These signatures came from all around Australia – this was a truly national campaign, reaching well beyond the contacts of the petition’s originators.

Most successful protest campaigns draw on support from individuals and organisations initially not engaged with the issue, people with no immediate connection or self-interest. However, there is usually an expert core who provide the knowledge base and initial activism for the campaign. In this case it was archivists employed outside government or retired who formed the core. In such circumstances, dormant networks or supporters with connections may resurface and make a significant contribution. Hence, a motion by the Greens opposing the closures could be proposed and passed by the Senate a few days after the announcement (with the acquiescence of the very government against whose actions it was directed).
In the past decade, the recordkeeping community and its allies in Australia have played an important role in defending two significant institutions against closure and major change imposed from the top. The first was the Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC) at the Australian National University: community action beyond the immediate stakeholders helped save the largest and longest-established collection of business and labour records in Australia from closure. This action ensured that non-government records remain available for research access. The second was the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA): led by the informal but very well-informed Archive Forum, the long-running campaign for independence from the AFC and for its own legislation was ultimately successful after the 2007 federal election. Here the action was in defence of a government archive that is responsible for collecting and preserving Australia’s non-government audio-visual heritage.

Both the NBAC and NFSA have local significance attached to their physical sites in Canberra. The tunnel over Parkes Way may not be beautiful but many Canberra residents know what is stored above the roadway near the edge of the campus. The NFSA occupies an iconic building not far away – the Institute of Anatomy building, a favourite destination for school visits to the national capital. The NBAC and NFSA have something else in common – active friends groups ready to assume a political role. While it NAA has many supporters, one difference between it and NBAC and NFSA is that it has never had an official friends organisation.

During the campaign, the language of the public protest drew frequently on the vocabulary of rights, specifically the denial of rights, as well as the deprivation or removal of services. This made the NAA’s economic argument – the need to find savings to satisfy the demands of government – much harder to make. The rights argument was often implicit and bound
up with arguments about fairness in the provision of services and equity of access for all, as one Northern Territory resident noted

   Central and northern Australia are starved of services, and here we are losing a crucial facility...Are we a federated nation where there is some attempt to equalise things across the country or are we not? Are we fair dinkum about Australia being a country where people can live with some equity of access to cultural institutions?  

Sometimes the argument was couched in general terms, and from outside the jurisdictions affected by the proposals:

   The History Council of Western Australia wishes to add its voice those of historians, researchers and archivists across Australia who see the decision to close the National Archives Offices in Adelaide, Darwin and Hobart as a retrograde step that will adversely impact on the history and heritage of our nation.

The provision of ‘local’ services to agencies and to researchers around the nation has been part of NAA’s organisational raison d’être for decades. The CAARA Statement of Principle – Providing public access to records in Australian government archives (2007) describes the rights of the public and the responsibilities of government archives (including NAA) concerning access thus:

   Access to government archives is a right of all members of the community, limited only in accordance with relevant legislation.

And:

   Archives should identify, and develop channels of communication with their users, potential users and their communities.

We know that archives and their services do not usually rate highly in lists of important, let alone essential, public services. However, when archives are personalised and understood as community memory and lost in a catastrophe such as the Victorian bushfires of 2009, they
assume a different place in the public imagination. Also, the apology to the Forgotten Australians was very recent and in the forefront of public concern late last year. More prosaically, the knowledge that government archives are funded by the public through the taxation system is always present in the minds of some when access to government records is in the public limelight.

Concern for access by Indigenous people was from the start a major feature of the campaign. Government archives schemes to enable Indigenous people to use records in archival custody have played an important part in connecting Indigenous Australians to their pasts. But that work is not finished. Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike did not anticipate withdrawal of local services that had been vital in helping the Stolen Generations.

The words of Barry Garside, former NAA staff member, were widely quoted…

I was privileged to work with indigenous people who were seeking information about their families...

This was the vanguard of the Stolen Generations movement and was only made possible by the location of the records being in the area in which the people lived. It was traumatic enough for them, but had the people been required to do this research in Canberra or some other southern centre it would have been impossible.¹¹

The campaign attracted media attention in a way few archives-related stories ever do. It was a sustained national story (in contrast to most other archives news stories which tend to promote events staged by major archives and other cultural agencies). Knowing that the 7.30 Report was following the story gave heart to the core of thinly-spread, far-flung activists. The community Cabinet meeting in Adelaide in late January was a lesson in getting the argument across (and in dealing with a minister who didn’t appear to have listened to the message directed at him by campaigners over the previous two months). The petitions with over 5700 signatures opposing the proposed closures were submitted to Parliament in early
February. NAA’s family history showcase – the very public and local event ‘Shake your family tree day’ – was coming up soon.

The purple prose of The Australian’s Nicolas Rothwell on 20 February in ‘Budget cuts put recorded history of nation under siege’ was not the sort of thing any Minister would want to read and rumours of an imminent change of position began to surface. The evening before ‘Shake your family tree day’, the co-location solution whereby the Federal presence would be maintained by facility-sharing with the respective state and territory archives agencies was announced. But planned local protests outside NAA in Adelaide and Hobart went ahead.

| Keep South Australia’s archives in South Australia |
| Keep National Archives in SA |
| We want the REAL archives, NOT the virtual ones. Keep SA records in South Australia |
| Thinkers no longer in residence in South Australia |
| Sorry Stolen Generations and Forgotten Australians. We’re sending your records away now |

*Figure 2: Some of the slogans from the protest outside the NAA, Adelaide Office*

The impact of the public campaign was acknowledged in media reports, for example in Adelaide: ‘On Tuesday, the Federal Government back-flipped, saying community pressure had forced it to rethink’12. It was also acknowledged in the local variants of the press release by the MPs representing the seats in which the NAA offices are located. ‘The Rudd Government has listened to community concerns, and the National Archives will maintain a local presence in each state and territory.’13

The RMAA noted the Government’s willingness to listen and to seek alternative solutions to the closures:
It is clear this willingness was encouraged to a certain degree by the ground swell of support that has come together from the professional community and the public users across Australia to voice their opposition to the proposed closures.

To every person who wrote articles, signed a petition, passed on news to the various listservs or attended the demonstration in Adelaide - thank you for your support of the NAA and its legacy to all Australians. Although many of them don’t know the service you have done them, you should take immense pride in this achievement, savour it but remain vigilant for the moment.14

How can we characterise the expectations of users of local services?

There is no single model of local use of archives, but here are some common experiences. If prepared, the researcher arrives knowing something about the process and may have ordered records in advance. If the user is a ‘walk-up’, then they may arrive knowing next to nothing about processes and rules. They all interact at some point with staff. Some users experience Eureka moments, others find intriguing but incomplete clues that lead to new directions and others still discover or confirm details of sad events in their family history. Many family historians are retired and enjoy the companionability of visiting the archives to do their research, often building on what they have found online at home. Academic historians and students exchange suggestions that can lead to fruitful new directions in research.15 Being there to listen is a critical contribution of the archivist. The information gained from researchers in this ‘instant’ feedback about the records (and the effectiveness of finding aids) is also useful for evaluation and planning purposes. We don’t know how many online researchers take the trouble to hit the feedback button to convey something similar. We know that they communicate their experiences to their own online communities on listservs or via blogs or social networking sites.

Today it isn’t really possible in the English-speaking world to talk about archives and the public without acknowledging the ‘Who do you think you are’ (WDYTYA) phenomenon.
This program – in all its national variants – has brought a particular vision of archival research to the lounge rooms of millions of viewers. We see glimpses of stacks and we see helpful archivists and historians looking at screens. But it is the stories about individuals and communities that make the show. It’s not just about meeting distant relatives in distant lands, but also meeting the experts who provide that little bit more evidence or that little bit more speculation about an ancestor’s life that can make the whole thing more gripping. Presumably, the many viewers encouraged to start or continue the journey to find their own origins don’t expect the treatment accorded to film or rock stars, but they do expect to meet helpful people… WDYTYA is presenting and potentially reinforcing particular images of what archives are about, what archivists do and what services the public can expect. This includes both local and online services. While WDYTYA (UK) is entertainment produced for the mass market, its aims extend beyond this:

Who Do You Think You Are® is a landmark documentary series chronicling the social, ethnic and cultural evolution of national identities through the personal family histories of prominent celebrities.16

Another prominent example of archives being associated with identity is ‘Democracy starts here’, the YouTube video accessible from the US National Archives front page. This presents stories of ordinary Americans finding their identities in the archives. It is important to remember here that public access is not only about research. For the last two decades or so, NAA and other government archival agencies in Australia have put considerable resources into public programs such as exhibitions, talks and other events designed to attract and educate the general public about archives.17

How can we characterise the expectations of users of online services?18

These can be divided into the search process and the results. For the search process, users expect services to be reliable. Websites have less downtime than they used to, but users can
become frustrated if familiar websites change. They expect that navigation will be easy and will lead to success. And that claims to comprehensiveness are accurate. A knowledgeable family historian will expect to find their ancestor on a list or with a file if the institution claims that everything in the relevant category (shipping lists, service records and so on) has been digitised.

Once the search process is complete and the online user is down to the item or document level, what do they expect? Legibility and ease of printing, and the ability to make copies that are free or have only a minimal charge. Online users expect payment should be quick and easy (the online user always has charges – such as internet access, download limits, paper, printer – so nothing is actually free). Increasingly, users expect to be able to add their own tags to the metadata provided and thus to be active partners in maintaining access to digital archives.

Local and online users are often differentiated by dividing them into two groups – the former who know something about archives being unique and about how to use finding aids and the latter who are only interested in finding specific pieces of information and are never likely to step inside an archives building. However, it isn’t so simple: sometimes they are one and the same person. I am an online family historian who like many others has benefited from the digitisation programs of the Australian War Memorial and NAA in tracing the stories of their World War I soldier ancestors. To follow some of my other research interests, such as the origins of labour archives in Australia, I am a user of local services.
Solutions

How much should we accept the divergence between the online and the local user? There are similarities as well as differences. Both expect archives to provide services that help them to use records, whatever their form and whatever their location and they expect those services to improve. The expectations of non-users are less known: the ‘Stop the closures’ campaign suggests that there is a broader public expectation that archives once established will remain open.

Now to two examples from the UK of studies of the relations between users and archives. First, the experience of TNA in assessing the impact of increased availability of online sources on the provision of local services. Digitisation was likely to produce the anticipated effect of allowing researchers to avoid visiting Kew, but it was also, as Chris Cooper noted in 2008

…extending public awareness of records and records information, stimulating interest in other records which may not be digitised, and raising public expectations about the possibilities of research and about what services record offices should provide. These factors are leading to new visits and enquiries, as well as changing their nature, thus posing fresh challenges to on-site record office services which will require change and investment. 19

Facilities at Kew were redesigned to support the needs of different types of onsite users: areas where users primarily use online material onsite (including a Learning Zone) and other areas where traditional research using original records takes place (comparable to the orientation and main reading rooms division in Australasian government archives).

Now to the second example. Recognising that ‘local’ visits were in decline, the Oxfordshire Record Office (ORO) developed a project find out why and to offer alternative experiences to community members unlikely ever to visit. The non-users surveyed questioned why their
taxes should be spent on supporting an institution whose existence they did not value.\textsuperscript{20} The ORO responded with some soul-searching and re-examined the case for its own existence, deciding that active promotion of its holdings and new ways of bringing them to the local audience were essential. The result was ‘Dark Archivist’, an interactive website showcasing stories from Oxfordshire’s past, directed primarily at young people, a key non-user demographic for whom history is often ‘one more boring examination subject’.\textsuperscript{21} Dark Archivist is a cartoon character and the site makes use of games technology to present experiences from the archives which involve using investigative skills and which succeed in bringing the past to the present in imaginative ways. Dark Archivist is an alternative pathway to a local archives, which in the words of County Archivist Carl Boardman

… reflects the plurality of the present age, attempting to multiply the ways in which people can access the information we hold and thereby make archives fundamental to the way society perceives itself.\textsuperscript{22}

The future of online services

Digitisation and the provision of online services are well-established in Australia, especially in major libraries and in government archives. And this will continue. But right now it has to be asked:

- how are cultural institutions in the Commonwealth arena supposed to digitise large parts of their collections if they are expected to work with progressively reducing budgets? and
- will more digitisation of records (excluding the digitisation of finding aids) inevitably mean that archives will reduce or eliminate other services?

For smaller and non-government archives, digitisation is a growing pressure whose main impact is increased workloads for staff. I would argue that we need to strive to better understand the user and non-user communities, and to acknowledge that the range of online services is variable and is still developing. A related issue is that if archives wish to
understand community expectations, then meaningful engagement with their communities is essential (this happened in the two UK cases I have just outlined).

**Summary and conclusion**

Community expectations are dynamic, not static. They change over time: even ten years ago, users (and potential users) did not expect ‘access’ to records to be routinely delivered online. Now archives users can expect to do more and more of their research online, without leaving their homes (or workplaces). Archival institutions are expected to provide both local and online services. Once local services are established, it is difficult to reduce or eliminate them and to present this as a positive outcome, even when visits are in decline. Economies of scale and the need to balance budgets are not generally accepted as justifications for administrative actions to reduce or close services, especially when the community is prepared to use the right to access as a key argument for the retention of local services. Active users of local archives services and less engaged communities take pride in archives and want services they associate with ‘archives-as-a-place’ to be retained. And as we have seen, they will take action to defend these services. At base, they are concerned that access to records which assist them to discover and confirm personal, sectional and national identities may be reduced or lost. The potential for conflict is reduced when there is trust and cooperation between institutions and communities. It is to be hoped that this will be the long-term outcome of the ‘Stop the closures’ campaign.

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2 Yorke, S. (2000) ‘Great expectations or none at all: The role and significance of community expectations in the appraisal function’, *Archives and manuscripts*, p.31
3 Yorke, ‘Great expectations’, p. 34
4 Standards Australia (2009) HB278 *Recordkeeping compliance*, Glossary, p.81
6 Dissenting nuclear scientists have been a traditional source of knowledge for anti-nuclear movements. See also McCausland, S (2004) ‘Defending collections: What makes them so vulnerable’ unpublished paper presented at ANU Collections Seminar, June.

7 The story of the struggle to save the NBAC is covered in several of the chapters in Howarth, B and Maidment, E (eds) (2003) Light from the tunnel: Collecting the Archives of Business and Labour at the Australian National University, Canberra: Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre. See also McCausland, S (2007) ‘Access: the success of advocacy’ in Made, kept and used: Celebrating 30 years of the Australian Society of Archivists. Canberra: ASA.

8 Quoted by Nicolas Rothwell, Weekend Australian 20-21 February 2010.

9 Letter to Director-General, NAA 30 November 2009. Later posted on aus-archivists listserv.


Among others by Nicolas Rothwell, Weekend Australian 20-21 February 2010.


12 For example, Joint media release 06/2010, 23 February 2010 from Minister Joe Ludwig and ALP parliamentarians Warren Snowdon, Damian Hale and Trish Crossin, ‘Rudd Government listens to Darwin on National Archives’.

13 RMAA official communication 26 February 2010, David Pryde, Chair. Addressed to Dear Members, RIM Colleagues and those with a public interest.


18 My discussion here relates to government and other free online services, not commercially-based services such as ancestry.com.


20 See Yorke, S ‘…public opinion is subjective, volatile and even mutually contradictory in its demands’, ‘Great expectations…’ p.26.


22 ‘Dark archivist’, p.684.