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Harmony and Disharmony: Selections from the XXI International Oral History Association (IOHA) Conference in 2021.

Counting On Oral History

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This article discusses two recent projects the author has worked on with public libraries in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The first project is an audit of public library local studies collections, which is a detailed survey of NSW public library local studies collections, services, programs and staffing. The second project is to assist public libraries with undertaking new oral history recordings. The oral history project focuses on contemporary collecting, so that recent information is included in local studies collections in public libraries. Representative contemporary collecting may assist to bring together stories which otherwise have not been collected, and which could help document diverse viewpoints of communities, hopefully assisting in deepening community understanding.

Local studies audit

The State Library of NSW undertakes an annual collection of statistics from public libraries on a wide range of areas including collections, staffing and services[1]. This data has been collected since 1977[2] and includes information about local studies collections and programs. To expand on this data, and starting in 2004, every five years a very detailed survey of local studies collections and services is undertaken[3]. While exploring many aspects of local studies collections and services, the information about oral history will be the focus for this article.

In 2020, in NSW public libraries there were:
- 6,035 analogue oral history recordings
- 5,677 files for digital oral history recordings
- 1,987 analogue transcriptions
- 1,918 digital transcriptions.[4]

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[1] "Public library statistics", State Library of NSW, published 13 June 2022, accessed 24 January 2023 https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/advice-and-best-practice/public-library-statistics

[2] *Statistics ... Metropolitan and country public library services in New South Wales / State Library of New South Wales, Public Libraries Division* (Sydney: The Division, 1977-1986) https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/74Vvpq5Ld3Eb

[3] "NSW Public libraries local studies audit", State Library of NSW, published October 2021, accessed 24 January 2023 https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/nsw-public-libraries-local-studies-audit

[4] "NSW Public libraries local studies audit", pp 37, 38, State Library of NSW, published October 2021, accessed 24 January 2023 https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/nsw-public-libraries-local-studies-audit

Despite oral histories being recorded in digital formats for many years, these numbers demonstrate the need for public libraries to digitise their remaining analogue oral history recordings so that they are preserved and accessible for the future. There is also a need to digitise and make searchable any analogue transcriptions. From this data it is of note that there are significantly fewer transcriptions than oral history recordings regardless of format. Fewer transcriptions may contribute to difficulties of access[5] for the oral history recordings, as there is not always detailed information available about them – for example, logs of interviews. In the past the documentation of oral history recordings may not have been as detailed as current good practice requires. The oral history recordings are concentrated in a relatively small number of the 363 public libraries in NSW[6]. These statistics help to demonstrate the importance of more public libraries being able to undertake digital oral history recordings, catalogue them, make them available for their community and preserve them. In the local studies audit of 2013 there were 3,335 analogue sound recordings with 3312 digital sounds recording.[7] Most of these were digitised rather than digital recordings. This led to the portable collecting project for oral history, which will be discussed below.

Other data of interest is that 27% of the libraries who responded to the audit do not consider demographic data for how they collect local studies information. This was a contrast to the 56% of respondents who provided information about how the demography of their areas influences their local studies collection practices.[8] If a public library does not consider demographic information as part of their local studies collection practices, and over one quarter do not, it risks leading to bias in collecting.

Portable collecting, oral history
The State Library of NSW determined that one way of assisting public libraries to collect oral histories was to provide relevant equipment and training for them. In 2019 the State Library of NSW provided 11 oral history collection kits to public libraries using an expression of interest process so that libraries could describe their collecting priorities.[9] The priority collecting areas targeted for this project were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and multicultural communities. Why? Because 29.3% of the people in New South Wales were born overseas, and 56.3% of the people in that state have one or both parents who were born overseas; while 3.4%

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[5] Several NSW public libraries are using the transcription platform Amplify to obtain crowdsourced transcriptions for their oral history recordings. "Amplify", State Library of NSW, accessed 25 January 2023 https://amplify.gov.au/

[6] *As at June 2021 there were 363 public library buildings in NSW, and 25 mobile libraries servicing small and isolated communities. Note that a public library is defined as a library building that is provided by a local council in accordance with the Library Act 1939, open 10 or more hours a week, operated by paid staff and offering a range of library services and collections. In addition, councils provided a further 60 library service locations (including library deposit stations or service outlets), and 26 administration or specialist service points.* From "Public library statistics", State Library of NSW, published 13 June 2022, accessed 24 January 2023 https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/advice-and-best-practice/public-library-statistics

[7] "NSW Public libraries local studies audit", p12, State Library of NSW, published 2014 accessed 29 September 2023 https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/nsw-public-libraries-local-studies-audit

[8] See "NSW Public libraries local studies audit 2013" p 17, State Library of NSW, published October 2021, accessed 24 January 2023 https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/nsw-public-libraries-local-studies-audit

[9] All the libraries who submitted expressions of interest were successful.

of the New South Wales people are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people[10]. Aboriginal people and people who are culturally and linguistically diverse are underrepresented in local studies collections.[11]

The project is inspired by the *Archivist in a backpack*[12] program from Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina. Specialist staff at the State Library of NSW provided advice about what to include in the kit based on information from the University of North Carolina. The contents of the NSW kit are:

- Zoom recorder H5
- Accessory kit for Zoom recorder (this includes the power cord)
- 2 *32 GB memory card (Sandisk Extreme Pro 32GB 95MB)
- Sennheiser HD200 Pro Studio Headphones
- Panasonic Ni-MH Battery Charger with 4 Eneloop Batteries
- 2 * Microphone Rode NTG-1
- 2 * Microphone stand Rode Dm1 stand
- Microphone cables 3 per kit
- Oral history handbook by Beth M Robertson Fifth Edition
- Canon EOS M100 Mirrorless Digital Camera with 15-45mm Lens
- Pelican backpack to store and carry the kit
- a collection care kit

Two staff from each of the eleven selected libraries participated in training. From earlier oral history training it was determined that having two people participate in training increased the likelihood of implementation and success. Oral history training was provided by Dr. Paula Hamilton, a very experienced public historian, with the collection care training provided by one of the Senior Conservators at the State Library of NSW, Catherine Thomson. The training was provided late in 2019. For some NSW public libraries this was the first time they had undertaken oral history interviews, while other staff had experience in this area.

Few libraries had commenced their oral history projects when all of Australia experienced lockdown because of the COVID 19 pandemic in March 2020.[13] One of the participant libraries, Bega Valley Shire Libraries, was – prior to lockdown — able to record oral history interviews[14] with residents who had experienced the Border Fire as part of the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020. Orange Library undertook interviews of staff while the libraries were closed to

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[10] "New South Wales 2021 Census All persons QuickStats", Australian Bureau of Statistics, accessed 24 January, https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/1

[11] See "NSW Public libraries local studies audit" p 17, pp31-32, State Library of NSW, published October 2021, accessed 24 January 2023 https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/nsw-public-libraries-local-studies-audit

[12] "Archivist in a Backpack", University of North Carolina, accessed 23 January 2023, https://library.unc.edu/wilson/shc/community-driven-archives/archivist-in-a-backpack/

[13] "COVID-19: a chronology of state and territory government announcements" (up until 30 June 2020), Parliament of Australia, 22 October 2020, accessed 24 January 2023 https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2021/Chronologies/COVID-19StateTerritoryGovernmentAnnouncements

[14] "Bega Valley Shire Library oral history collection" Bega Valley Shire Library, accessed 24 January 2023 https://librarycatalogue.begavalley.nsw.gov.au/libero/WebOpac.cls?TERM=%27BEGA*VALLEY*SHIRE*LIBRARY*ORAL*HISTORY*COLLECTION%27&KEY=sr&TYPE=G&ACTION=RELATE&VERSION=2&TOKEN=DDtOeIXhBP8961&DATA=BVS

record the experiences of library staff as a result of the national COVID-19 lockdown in Australia in 2020. Other libraries, for example Goulburn Mulwaree Library, were able to interview people in a range of occupations in their community, after some restrictions had eased later in 2020 and before they were reimposed in 2021 .[15] These interviews are with people of varied ages and backgrounds to help tell the story of their area.

From information provided by library staff at these libraries, having the training and equipment meant they were able to be responsive to opportunities to document stories of their community.

A small number of libraries have yet to undertake interviews, because of staff turnover, while others have undertaken the interviews but are yet to catalogue them and make them available for their community. Shoalhaven Libraries, despite staff turnover, has been able to complete their interviews which are available online as the *Multicultural Shoalhaven oral history project.*[16] As the library staff had the training and the equipment they have continued undertaking oral history recordings, and have another series of recordings for the 150th anniversary of the Huskisson Public School.[17]

Even with some of the libraries yet to complete all their recordings, and a couple who are yet to start, this project has contributed more oral history recordings than a 2017 project which involved seventy public library staff being trained at Grafton, Dubbo, Wagga Wagga, Wollongong, and the State Library of NSW. The lack of recordings from this earlier project suggested the importance of including equipment as well as training. While this means that less libraries could be involved, it has delivered better outcomes for several communities who now have access to local and recent oral history recording undertaken in their communities.

Conclusion

These two projects show the importance of looking at data, for example the number of oral history recordings, as well as other relevant data including demographic data, and considering options to help change the situation so that public libraries can represent more of their communities in their local studies collections. It is important that this is done *with* communities rather than *for* communities. The portable oral history project is unlikely to ever be a smooth implementation, but the global Covid-19 pandemic and the distancing requirements, combined with staff turnover in some libraries, added extra challenges.

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