



Post Office Box U517
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NT 0815

12 October 2017

To NT Government
Darwin

Re: NT Digital Strategy

Dear Madam/Sir,

The Professional Historians Association (NT) represents professional historians in the Northern Territory. Professional historians work in a variety of fields including education, government, museums, mass media, legal research, heritage, planning studies, writing organisational histories (for schools, companies and interest groups) and local histories. Often they are involved in, or consult on, creative projects such as novels, plays, films and documentaries. They are also called on to advise allied professionals such as archaeologists, archivists, architects, town planners and valuers. Some professional historians are on the staff of government agencies or private organisations. Others are independent consultants available to carry out commissions for historical research and writing.

In the course of their research professional historians have accumulated vast experience in interacting with international, Australian and Northern Territory cultural institutions. This includes visits to the institutions themselves but increasingly via online platforms. PHANT members know the NT Archives Service (NTAS), Northern Territory Library (NTL), Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), and other cultural collections held by the Northern Territory Government and not for profit cultural institutions, intimately. It must be acknowledged that the NT cultural institutions have done an excellent job in establishing and maintaining the Northern Territory's cultural collections. The current consultations towards a digital strategy for the Northern Territory provide a timely opportunity to consider how the Northern Territory cultural collections are positioned in relation to digitisation and online access.

As a starting point, PHANT assesses the current online access to Northern Territory cultural collections for research purposes as limited to non-existent, depending on the institution in question. There can be no doubt that when

compared to other Australian jurisdictions the Northern Territory Government cultural institutions' online access is very limited. This makes research much more time consuming and therefore costly. This affects researchers from overseas, interstate and NT regional and remote communities most. It is impossible to know how many opportunities to research and tell Northern Territory stories are lost simply because online access to NT cultural collections is so limited.

The PHANT urges the Northern Territory Government to consider the personal capacity and material infrastructure required for Northern Territory cultural institutions to strive for digital and online best practice to put it at the cutting edge rather than the current situation where the NT appears to be lagging badly behind.

It is difficult to pinpoint how the issues of concern to the PHANT relate to the NT Government's Digital Strategy's five priority areas of jobs, children, bush, community and trust but they touch upon them all. Of the five digital drivers of digital strategy perhaps the most relevant to the research community is 'Share', 'make knowledge and data available to others to reuse and exploit for the benefit of all' and 'Protect', 'Safeguard digital information that is entrusted, including personal, sensitive, commercial-in-confidence and legally protect data'.

Since self-government NT cultural institutions have successfully developed and preserved fantastic collections, including Government records. However, the proportion of these collections that have been digitised and are available online is limited and varies from institution to institution. For example, the Northern Territory Archives Service oral history collection is an excellent primary source that allows researchers to hear Territory stories from those who were there, in their own voice. While researchers can search the content of the oral history collection via the 'Northern Territory Archives Service Oral History Search', no oral histories are available online. Researchers must attend the NTAS search rooms in either Darwin or Alice Springs. This is a disincentive to many researchers.

A critical question for the digital strategy is whether the NT cultural institutions have the personnel, infrastructure and resources to digitise their collections? If not the digital strategy must make this a priority and consider how this can be achieved. Should each NT cultural institution build its own digital capacity or is it better to consolidate resources to support and assist all NT cultural institutions?

As a further example the Northern Territory Library has its PictureNT searchable website which provides access to much of its photographic collection. The Northern Territory Archives Service (NTAS) and Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) have equally significant photograph collections but no online access at all. In regards to other private collections such as the Australian Aviation Heritage Centre, Katherine Museum or the Adelaide River Railway Museum it is very difficult to know what photographs exist in their collections without contacting them directly or going to each institution.

An important consideration for the digital strategy is whether the NT Government has a role in creating, developing and maintaining the digital expertise, capacity and infrastructure to support both NT Government and other not for profit NT cultural institutions and regional museums.

The Northern Territory does not have the highly developed commercial digital capacity to meet archival or museum digital preservation standards when compared to other Australian jurisdictions. Consequently if archival material cannot be digitised 'in house' then it is very likely that precious and fragile archival material must be sent interstate for digitisation. This is both a great expense and a significant risk to the archival material.

The digital strategy must consider providing greater support for creating and sustaining commercial operators that can provide the highest possible quality service to the Northern Territory's cultural collections.

To illustrate digital and online access best practice for cultural institutions the PHANT would like the digital strategy to consider what is offered by the National Library's TROVE online platform as an example of best practice from other jurisdictions that can inform the digital strategy. While TROVE is not the only example of a fantastic digital platform, considering it as a benchmark and comparing it to what is currently on offer from Northern Territory cultural institutions may be a useful starting point for the digital strategy.

National Library of Australia, TROVE

TROVE is an essential tool to all researchers. It brings together content from Australian libraries, museums, archives, repositories and other research and collecting organisations. It is a searchable portal initially designed to provide online access to the Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts, Picture Australia, Libraries Australia, Music Australia, Australia Dancing, PANDORA web archive, ARROW Discovery Service and the Australian Newspapers Beta service. Since its inception it continues to grow and develop. It allows researchers access to important primary source material including newspapers, oral histories, manuscripts and photographs from their own computer.

TROVE links to the Northern Territory Library but cannot provide access to all of its collections in full. While some other NT cultural collections are accessible via TROVE many are not. This is particularly so of NT regional and not for profit cultural collections. These smaller institutions are custodians of invaluable regional and specialised collections and deserve targeted consideration in the deliberations of the NTG digital strategy.

The digital strategy should consider if the NT needs its own TROVE and/or a means of developing its relationship with the National Library further to bring together all of its cultural collections to provide online access.

If the NTG digital strategy finds that an NT version of TROVE is not considered the best way forward for the NTG to develop a sustainable

digital platform that supports the research community in accessing both NTG cultural collections and those held in the NT regional and not for profit cultural collections, then a viable alternative must be created.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized, cursive 'S' followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr Steven Farram
Secretary, Professional Historians Association (NT)

On behalf of

Dr Samantha Wells
President, Professional Historians Association (NT)