Lost Darwin: an experiment in 'distributed curation' through social media

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ABSTRACT

Social media is frequently used by cultural institutions as a communication tool for marketing services and generating sector advocacy. But by reimagining, deepening and activating institutions' relationships to online audiences, it can also offer new opportunities for programming and collection development. In 2016 Northern Territory Library developed an exhibition entitled *Lost Darwin*, the content of which was shared, identified and sourced through Facebook. Using the project as a case study, this paper examines how cultural institutions can implement a 'distributed curation' model that takes the curatorial role of preservation, interpretation and presentation and shares it among a community, repositioning them as active creators in the process of cultural representation. It also shows how social media can successfully generate and inform community engagement priorities and operate as a strategic and cost-effective collection development tool.

INTRODUCTION

Galleries, libraries, archives and museums are consistently early-adopters of new technologies, yet when they become active in the world of social media, often find themselves underwhelmed by the results, and arguably underwhelming to their audiences. As Google's Avinas Kaushik reflects, "social media is like teen sex. Everyone wants to do it. No one actually knows how. When finally done, there is surprise it's not better" (Solomon, 2013, p.7). Alluring for its direct and cost-effective connection to communities, social media can be unexpectedly resource-intensive and is commonly implemented as a marketing tool, without a clear definition of success (Solomon, 2013, p.7). But reimagined, social media has so much more to offer cultural institutions. By taking the time to intimately understand potential audiences, their interests, behaviours and motivations, cultural institutions can deepen and enrich their online relationships. This paper examines how the Northern Territory Library (NTL) utilised social media to transform the reach and impact of its public programs, propel donations and redefine its relationship with the local community.

NTL analysed the ways its target audiences were using social media and used these learings to develop an exhibition entitled *Lost Darwin*, with content sourced and curated entirely from Facebook. The resulting exhibition featured 65 photographs from 30 contributors, showcasing the most popular and engaging historical photographs of Darwin commonly posted and shared across local Facebook groups and pages. It effectively distributed the curation process, by translating the preferences of online communities into the library's exhibition space. The project aimed to start new conversations, grow meaningful relationships with new audiences, both online and through physical visitation, and experiment with the use of social media to identify significant personal collections and encourage cultural donations. It was launched in front of more than 400 people, the largest opening of its kind in NTL's history. It lead to an explosion of activity within the library and online, generating unprecedented media coverage and a series of new donations, all of which reasserted NTL as a premier collecting institution in the Northern Territory. *Lost Darwin* provides a case

study of how the transfer of curatorial control can energise public programming and collection development activities, simultaneously transforming audiences from faceless, passive entities into engaged partners and powerful advocates, for the exhibition and hopefully for the institution and sector as a whole.

The *Lost Darwin* exhibition, Northern Territory Library, 1 June 2016.

CONTEXT: KNOW YOUR SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM

Social media is too frequently used by cultural institutions as just another tool for general operational announcements and the promotion of programs or services that they have been offering for decades via community noticeboards and newsletters. This kind of approach has been described as 'publishing' as opposed to 'conversing' (Crawford, 2013, p.12). To genuinely converse, cultural institutions must intimately understand the specific social ecosystem that they inhabit. Social media is not about coverage or numbers, it's about connections to actual people, and these connections want to talk back to you. Refer to any social media marketing guide and it will tell you to get know your customer, their tastes and interests, to find the common values between their needs and your goals. Audiences are ready to engage at a much deeper level than simply reading a newsletter. A recent study of social media usage in the Northern Territory (NT) identified Territorians as the most frequent users of social media in Australia, with the greatest average number of friends and followers (Sensis 2016, p.22-26). This is despite the NT's significant cultural and language barriers, remoteness and often limited internet access. That picture is supported by Bandias and Sharma, who found Territorians to be active and prolific users of social media who overwhelmingly prefer Facebook over other platforms (2015, p.89). The NT is also highly transient, with an annual population turnover of seven per cent, the highest of any state or territory in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics,

2011). Territorians are overcoming the tyranny of distance and displacement by using social media to maintain contact with interstate friends and family, while they concurrently build personal and professional networks locally (Bandias & Sharma, 2015, p.90). To service them properly, NT libraries, museums, archives and galleries must reach them there on their own terms, engaging within their specific patterns of social media use. Rather than simply looking just at the library sector, NTL undertook an audit of the most popular social media accounts in the NT as a whole, analysing what it was about the content that they offered that was so engaging for people. It revealed something quite unique about their behaviour.

Darwin has a recurring history of mass destruction through cyclones and war. It has been virtually flattened four times since its founding, most recently in 1974 when Cyclone Tracy caused the evacuation of over 35,000 people, the largest civil evacuation in Australian history (Ling, 2011, p.108). As many as 60 per cent of residents never returned to Darwin (Carson, 2008, p.5). This history of permanent migration following disaster and the NT's ongoing population turnover means there are large networks of former residents dispersed across Australia and internationally. Social media has played a significant role in reuniting these fragmented communities. Facebook is being used by current and former residents to share, reinforce and preserve collective memory, through pages and groups such as *Lost Darwin*, *Darwin Teens of the 70s and 80s*, *Old Darwin* and *Darwin History*. These pages attract up to 11,000 participants each, making them some of the largest social networks in the Northern Territory. With few historical buildings remaining, these Facebook communities have become dynamic and rehabilitative platforms for the sharing of personal images, reflections, stories and forgotten histories of a city transformed by disaster and rapid development both physically and culturally. As Lea observes, "if architectural dynasties define a city, then Darwin's nostalgia hovers over rare pickings", and they do that enthusiastically on social media (2014, p.165-166). Nostalgia, as Hirsch argues, can be viewed in psychological terms as a driving force for actual behavior, attempting to recreate an idealised past in the present (1992, p.391). Social media provides a powerful collaborative platform on which to do so, curating and documenting social histories through the use of personal photographic collections and those of cultural institutions.

Although Darwin is just one place in which Facebook is being used in this way, a closer examination of it reveals some distinct local patterns. The strongest engagement is generally triggered by content that is highly localised, conveys or looks for for a strong sense of belonging and identity, offers something to debate or solve, and tends to feature rare imagery. There is no better example of this pattern than the great escalator debate of 2013, when an argument began on the *Darwin Teens of the 70s and 80s* Facebook page over the validity of claims that the former Woolworths building in Darwin's CBD once boasted an escalator. The debate went viral, sparking thousands of comments, likes and shares, eventually resulting in a plea for help from *The NT News*:

> WELL, THAT ESCALATED QUICKLY: Sheryn writes "please settle an argument for us... We cannot get access to Lands and Planning records and we have no interior photos. Some claim a lot of drug addled minds rode the steps, leading to the belief that there were "moving stairs" - however we would like it settled... with proof. 20% say there was an escalator, 70% say never and 10% don't give a #@*&. We are heading into old age and don't want to carry this unresolved question with us!"
>
> (2013)

This call for proof resulted in enquiries to relevant government departments, Woolworths and to NTL, until one participant produced a rare photograph of a darkened stairway that allegedly proved the stairs were fixed, not moving (Manicaros, 2015). However the revelation of the evidential image simply fuelled the next wave of passionate and playful debate rather than resolving it (Butt, 2016). In understanding the flammability of the discussion, I argue that it operated as a shibboleth, a distinctive cultural filter that granted participation to those who could demonstrate highly localised knowledge of Darwin from a specific period. It evoked engagement motivated by the desire or opportunity to declare authenticity, local identity and perceived belonging. A verdict was irrelevant. The debate was perpetuated by the enjoyment and comfort of being in a recreated cultural space. This example also highlights the difficulty in finding original documentary materials from the NT, a particular challenge for its collecting institutions. With the damage, destruction and removal of documentary heritage after World War II, Cyclone Tracy, through the ongoing population turnover and challenging climatic conditions, old Darwin images are increasingly rare and

difficult to obtain. On social media, they're hot property.
Damon Wagland's proof of stairs, Facebook post on *Darwin Teens Of the 70s and 80s*, December 2015.

The principles of engagement set organically by the old Darwin online communities, now an identified target audience, directly underpins the content and behaviour of NTL on Facebook. As a result the NTL page has grown rapidly in its first year to a size equivalent to over 1.2 per cent of the Territory's population, the highest proportional reach of any comparable state library. Its reference librarians are responding to enquiries and offering insights into ongoing historical debates on Facebook posts. In return, NTL is drawing on the expertise of its new online community to fill in significant gaps in metadata across its photographic collections. It is now a part of a community in the truest sense, as opposed to having grown a 'following'. But why stop there? What is the potential to expand this engagement and integrate it into the institution's

other core activities and decision-making? Why couldn't it be used to inspire and inform the focus of our public programming and to identify and inform strategic collection development priorities as well?

'DISTRIBUTED CURATION': THE AUDIENCE DECIDES

Social media has changed the behaviour and expectations of clients in physical library spaces as well as virtual ones. With increasingly social media savvy audiences, cultural institutions must continue to adapt their curatorial approaches beyond traditional presentations of objects held at distance from the viewer, just to remain engaged and relevant. As Mittelman describes, audiences now have the expectation that they will interact with the content on display by curating virtual exhibits, disseminating images and information via their own social channels or participating in a public dialog around issues relevant to them (2016). This has seen a shift to interactivity, mainly through the inclusion of technology used to enable audiences to participate in and curate their own experiences within the exhibition space. There have been recent experiments with crowdsourced exhibitions. One example is *YOUR Gallery* at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 2012. Supported by local radio, the public was encouraged to select from a predetermined range of works, voting for their inclusion in the exhibition (Art Gallery of South Australia, 2012). A similar model was used at Seattle's Frye Art Museum in its *#SocialMedium* exhibition in 2014, that also allowed its audience to select from over 200 paintings via social media (McMillan 2014). However, as Edmundson argues, very little control is actually handed to the audience (2015). They are instead presented with a range of preselected artworks that fit within predetermined themes, and thus the execution of the exhibition remains entirely in the hands of professional curators. These experiments with crowdsourced exhibitions, while worthy initiatives, support Gurian's conclusion that the core business of cultural institutions remains largely unchanged philosophically, despite their adoption of certain digital technologies, "their new websites and shiny new technological reference centres" (2010, p.97).

Having now established a community-focused, engaged social media presence, NTL set out to share greater curatorial control with its audiences in its physical spaces as well. Conscious that only a small proportion of its online community regularly visited the library, if at all, it asked what sorts of programming would lure them across the digital/real-world divide? The answer was scrolling past in its Facebook feed. It would exhibit *their* content. Audiences are now active digital curators who are themselves preserving, researching, interpreting and presenting content relevant to their social experience from their personal collections, complemented by content from collecting institutions. Why not grant them the opportunity to do so in the physical space also? By sourcing content through Facebook, the *Lost Darwin* exhibition took the centralised, internal curatorial role and distributed it among a community, repositioning the library as facilitators whose aim was to reflect the curatorial preferences of its community within a space. This approach represents a controversial shift and one which raises a live issue in curatorial thinking, since it can been seen to threaten traditional curatorial quality, power and control. In an open letter published by Hermitage Museum in 2012 (which is notably no longer available online), the writer asked "is there any way that what someone does on Facebook is comparable to the years of training and knowledge which goes into curating collections in museums and galleries?" (Cairns, 2012). It's a useful question, however framing it in this way forces the curator and the public into a false relationship of competition, rather than opening up the possibilities for collaboration. I ultimately agree with Cairns who argues "people do these things with or without us. But

maybe if we stop fighting it, we can capitalise upon it" (2012). Inviting genuine contribution from the audience need not displace the traditional curator, nor tarnish the respect the public has for curatorial work of high quality, and done well can even enhance it. *Lost Darwin* suggests an alternative model that empowers the curatorial determinations of an audience, effectively converting them from a faceless, passive entity into dynamic, meaningful and engaged partners, and powerful advocates for the institution and for the sector.

**PROCESS: THE CHALLENGE OF 'DISTRIBUTED CURATION'**

Identifying content

NTL began the development of the *Lost Darwin* exhibition by identifying the most popular and poignant content shared across key Darwin history pages and groups. An audit identified those posts that gained more than 100 likes or 80 comments, a threshold set relative to the level of engagement on a particular page. Recurring themes, characters or stories that stoked engagement across the pages were noted, including everything from Darwin's more eccentric pastimes to vanished spaces. Sometimes a theme or a specific person or landmark would crop up repeatedly and these generally made it into the shortlist. At times it was difficult to avoid excessive gatekeeping, for example, sometimes a recurring photograph seemed of lower quality than another of the same subject, but the audience loved *this* one. In that situation, they usually have their reasons and by respecting that, it was hoped that the audience response would be stronger. The question of balance emerges here, as the images chosen through this process could easily have failed to represent some key aspects of the city's history and population at this stage. Arguably this is a point at which the institution *can* bring its skills to bear, making some subtle curatorial decisions to ensure that important elements are not overlooked, but without compromising the point of the exercise.

Sourcing content

The NTL obtained permission to exhibit the images from their owners and in many cases had to request high-resolution versions of the original photographs to print them at a larger size. Contacting individuals through Facebook is challenging and time-consuming and having the support of page and group administrators as project partners was essential. The library attempted to contact all potential contributors by commenting on their Facebook posts, briefly describing the project and inviting them to contact the library. Over the next few weeks, dozens of people responded with overwhelming enthusiasm. One contributor, within an hour of our initial contact on Facebook, arrived unannounced at the library, clutching two personal albums documenting little-known aspects of Darwin's history, rare photos of immeasurable cultural value. While the initial interest was encouraging, this process was unpredictable, so it was important to target a larger number of photographs than it was possible to display. The images people post on Facebook are usually the highlights from their personal collections. In some instances, this means they are regularly removed from the family album and are physically circulated among family and friends and, sadly, are often lost in the process. One example, was that of a rare photograph (below) of local legend Jaffa, a 'Malay' man who after coming to Australia as an indentured labourer for northern Australia's pearling industry managed to find a job as a local chef. By the 1970s, his popularity and skills in the kitchen had made him a household name, however during an immigration crackdown, attempts were made to

deport Jaffa. More than 20 per cent of Darwin's population signed a petition requesting that he be granted citizenship, and they were successful (NT Pub Co Pty Ltd, 2016). This story is hugely popular on Facebook, but when the owner of this extraordinary image was contacted, he was unable to find the original, having recently shared it with friends and family. With great effort the owner managed to source an alternative image which was included in the exhibition. Amusingly, a selection of potential contributors replied to us that they had actually sourced the photos from NTL's own online collections. Therefore, about a quarter of the exhibition ended up being NTL-owned images, which served to highlight for this key audience the relevance of NTL collections. Contributors opted to deliver or send their original prints to the library to be digitised and then returned. Alternatively, they could digitise their image themselves. Accurate receipting and documentation of this process was essential to ensure the tracking, storage and safety of the images. It was a convoluted process so it was important to have a clear final deadline for submissions.
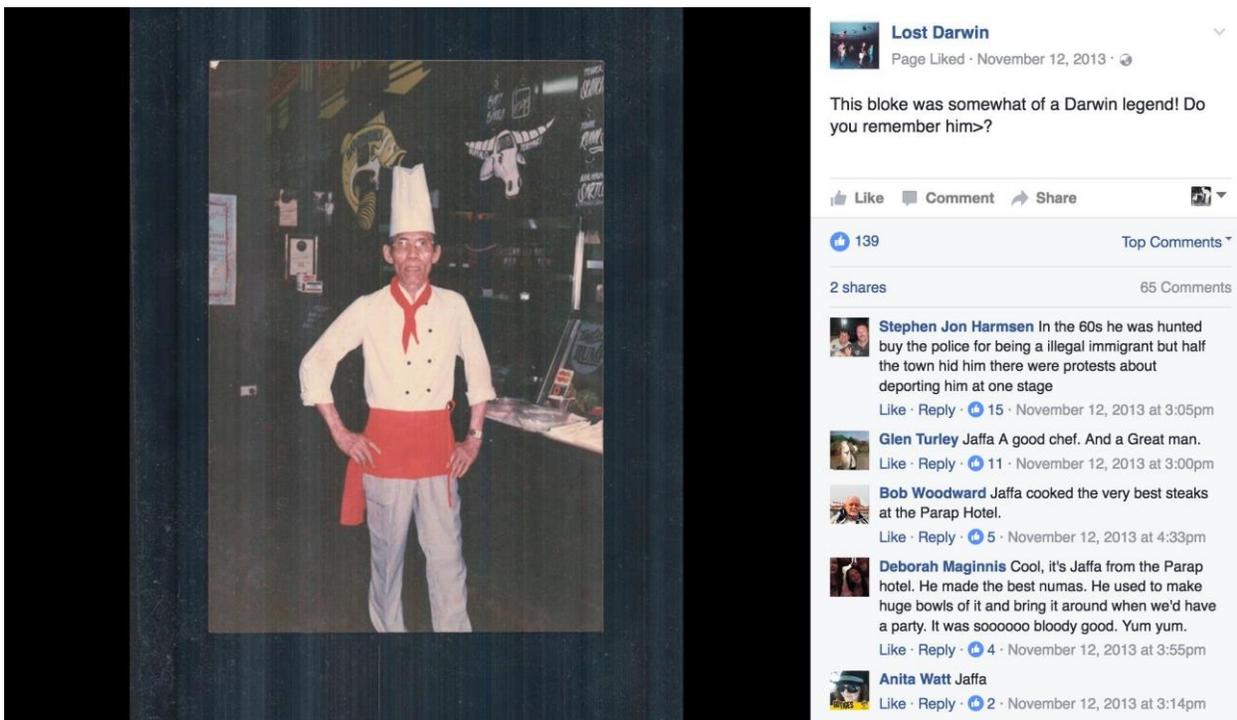

A scanned image of Jaffa, Facebook post on *Lost Darwin*, 12 November 2013.

Presenting content

The next part of the development process was the collection of the metadata and story for each image label. Commonly only a fraction of the full story is initially shared on Facebook. For example, images that always inspire enthusiastic engagement are those featuring suburban roller rink Skateworld, the site of thousands of coming-of-age experiences among Darwin's teens. One such image (below) was taken on the final day prior to the closure of the roller rink. Upon consultation, the owner of the image revealed the lengths to which her family had gone to be part of the rink's final day. Inline skating had grown more popular than roller skating since she had been a regular at the rink, and not knowing how to rollerblade, the photo's owner sourced a crate of old roller skates from rural South Australia, abandoned after the recent closure of a local rink. They were freighted to Darwin, the ball bearings were replaced in the skates and the

photo's owner gracefully skated the rink for the last time. Obtaining and describing these sorts of stories on the wall labels contextualised the sometimes apparently inexplicable popularity of these images online.
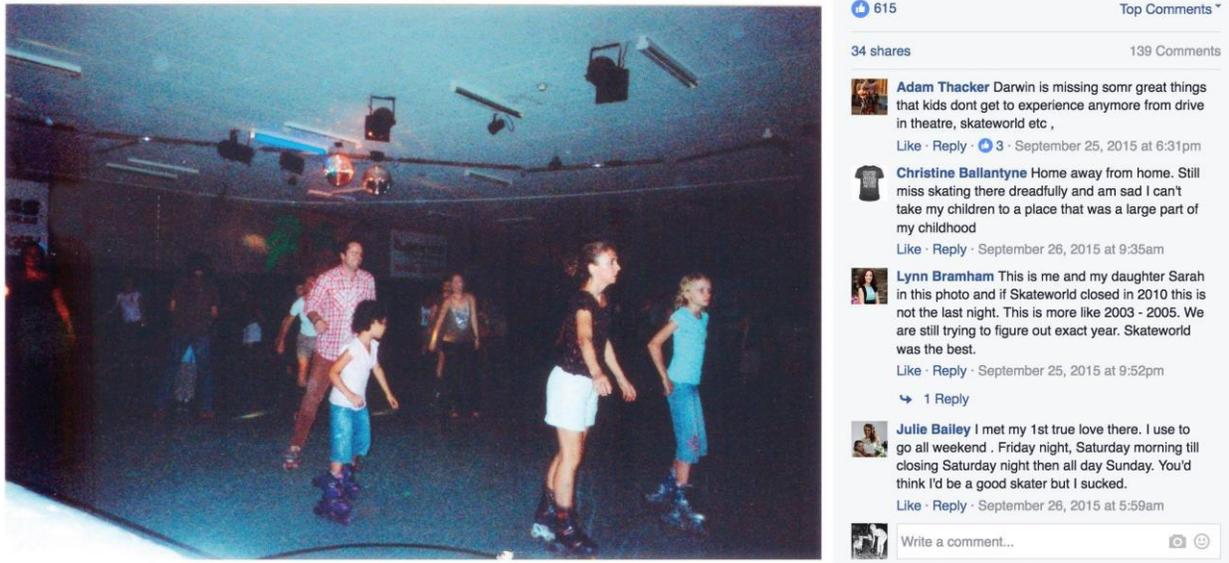
Skateworld, Facebook post on *Lost Darwin*, 25 September 2015.

Borrowing from the aesthetics of the family photo wall at home, the photos' groupings were loosely thematic, allowing for a relatively unstructured exploration. The show created a somewhat disjointed, slow build of memories and ideas that was deliberately similar to scrolling through a social media feed.

RESULTS: FINDING LOST DARWIN

The *Lost Darwin* exhibition was successfully launched on 1 June 2016 in front of more than 400 people, the largest opening of its kind in NTL's history. The display of 65 photographs contributed by more than 30 current and former residents from across Australia was wildly popular. It resulted in unprecedented media coverage across all major news networks. In a survey size of 200 visitors to the exhibition, it received a 94 per cent satisfaction rate, with 96 per cent saying they would recommend it to others and 83 per cent stating that the content was relevant to them. On opening night one visitor exclaimed, "That's me!" upon discovering her face among a crowd in one of the images. As one survey respondent noted, the exhibition was "just for us, by us". They got it. The experiment in distributed curation had paid off.

Lost Darwin successfully engaged with new audiences both online and within the library itself. Of its visitors, 81 per cent were from the NT, a departure from standard visitation figures that normally reflect a high proportion of tourists. The exhibition had successfully attracted a new local audience with 32 per cent saying they had never visited NTL before and another 34 per cent reporting they generally only visit once a year. In short, these were not library regulars. NTL floor staff reported there was also a high level of repeat visitation on top of the normal tourist numbers, as long-term residents brought back friends, family, neighbours and visitors.

The exhibition triggered rich conversation. Despite the not-insignificant investment in its promotion, nearly 28 per cent of visitation was as a result of social media and 27 per cent through word of mouth. The intimacy and personal nature of the photos appeared to have a way of disarming people - normal social conventions did not apply here, as reaction, emotion and memory took over. It was a common sight to see strangers who had arrived to see the exhibition separately, huddled together after a while, deep in conversation and debate. Elderly residents talked to younger, newer residents as though being granted a rare opportunity to explain their city for themselves, each with their own unique reflections on the images on the wall in front of them and the unrecognisable contemporary city outside. As one survey respondent reported on a feedback form, the thing he/she liked the most about the exhibition was "hearing locals talk about their memories, jogged by the images". In anticipation of this, the exhibition featured QR codes on the image labels, linking directly back to the original content on Facebook, allowing visitors to read and participate in the ongoing conversations online. Although the exact level of their uptake is unknown, the codes closed the digital/physical loop, connecting audiences from the gallery back to the source on social media. For the non tech-savvy, the exhibition also provoked further participation and conversation through a memory wall, where visitors could write and display their memories triggered by the images. The geographic locations of the images was also omitted from the images labels, leaving it to the audience to geolocate each image on a map displayed in the centre of the space using small flags featuring thumbnails of each image. Staying true to one of the more successful engagement philosophies first identified when NTL developed its social media strategy, the exhibition successfully translated the power of a mystery into the physical programming environment rather than delivering an over-researched fait accompli. Interestingly, the resulting behaviour of visitors in the social media and physical environment were remarkably similar - intense engagement, discussion and debate.

Significantly, *Lost Darwin* has led to new donations both from contributors and visitors to the exhibition, materials of highly significant historical value. One such donor, an ex-Darwin resident living in Sydney, saw a story about the exhibition on a national television network and rang the library the following day wanting to donate materials. Many contributors commented, "I didn't think you'd be interested in this stuff!" Therefore, perhaps more important than the sum of individual donations was the fact that the exhibition generated increased awareness of NTL as a vibrant collecting institution that is interested in local history and in preserving documentary heritage. One survey respondent wrote that his/her favourite thing about the exhibition was "the reminder to bring old photos in here for your collection."

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE IS THUMBS UP

Cultural institutions support communities, and communities are increasingly explicit about what they like and don't like, their interests and preferences. The question is, are we listening? Every community uses social media differently so it is critical to work out the patterns of engagement among key target audiences by asking why it is that certain content evokes such a significant response, what makes it unique and what we can offer. If the preservation and safeguarding of a community's history is to remain a key role of cultural institutions, then time spent understanding the social ecosystems in which they operate can be invaluable. Social media has an underexplored potential to detect the significance of cultural materials to a community, and could be used to identify future donations and make collection development processes more porous. This offers rich opportunities to build meaningful, genuine, engaged relationships and

reassert the relevance of our organisations and collections to our communities. Rather than telling a community how important our services are, it is far more valuable to *show* them, and on their terms, by making timely contributions to issues and ideas relevant to them. The *Lost Darwin* case study demonstrates what happens when you carry that engagement philosophy into physical spaces as well, respecting the curatorial preferences of that community enough to share control. Rather than speculating what content will interest them, social media offers us an opportunity to closely examine their preferences and use these to inform our programming and collection development strategies. The distributed curation model is an opportunity for cultural institutions to bring fresh, organic content into their spaces, validating the choices and experiences of their audience in the formal institutional setting. It *shows* audiences that we value their unique perspectives and experiences, deepening engagement and our responsiveness to current cultural dialogues within the digital landscape. That said, social media is not without its own inherent bias, privileging those with the means of access. What further opportunities could online social networks offer cultural institutions in representing marginalised or unpopular perspectives?

Together with these questions, cultural institutions also need to consider where management of social media sits within their organisational structures. Social media may not be best placed deep within the marketing or communications team but rather centralised to work across traditional departmental lines, and used to inform organisational priorities and decision-making. It is not just another marketing or publishing platform and is certainly not something that simply requires 'monitoring' or 'maintenance'. To see it that way is to miss the opportunity that social media offers cultural institutions. It's a rich stream of ideas, a social thermometer, a collaborative curation tool for programming and a treasure trove for strategic collection development. Indeed, it can probably be even more than that - we just don't know it yet.

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