

The global reach of local collections

Elizabeth Ho, associate director, State Library of South Australia

Tyrranny of distance' is a phrase that most Australians recognise. While gold, wool and the bush remain dominating yet myth-ridden themes of Australia's history, it has been the landmark technology and transport advances that have firmed Australia as the most city-bound population in the world, and created particular patterns of national development.

From overland telegraph, rail, motor vehicles, refrigeration, telephone, television, facsimile, satellite and the Internet we can trace the battles against distance that have been fought and won. One could say that the long-term survival of country centres will to some extent depend on how recent communications technologies are utilised to improve their business and information base.

Library users have been well-served by technological advances, starting with on-line public access catalogue developments and moving through to Internet rollout to public libraries, as has already commenced in a number of States.

Communication is enhanced both globally and locally through Internet provision. There is the obvious benefit of opening up new world resources to local users, but the reverse is also the case. Making local services and collection information more accessible via their website gives the local libraries a new role as providers of unique resources based on their special holdings.

The richness of local holdings is considerable. The Bicentennial Historic Records Search showed the breadth of material in private hands. We can only guess at the resources of the local collections that many public libraries have carefully developed with the support of their communities. The new technology age has the power to give unique collections new audiences.

One that I knew well a few years back is that of the Robe Public Library in the south east of South Australia. Well-organised, its local history collection complemented a local interpretive centre which had used selected material from the collection. The result was a sophisticated presentation of Robe's rich history for the visitor.

Robe was on the overland route for the maligned Chinese gold miners of the nineteenth century, and a centre for the south-eastern crayfish industry, to name but two distinctive features. Much of the content of

the collection could be invaluable in supporting cultural tourism to the southeast coast, via the web. As the world becomes smaller there is also an increasing interest in the differences that the cultural landscape can offer. Local collections can explain those differences.

A number of the National Library of Australia's Community Heritage preservation grants applications from libraries and community history organisations recently have requested digitisation of photo and other collections, such as architectural building plans, as a means of reducing wear and tear on originals. These projects go beyond preservation support — they allow access as never before.

While there continues to be an interest in the CD-ROM format for collections of photos and documents, it is the Internet that offers the best scope for broad access to such resources. Linked to a website, local pictorial databases with image attachments, for example, mean that interested researchers and enthusiasts can delve into collections that were previously geographically dispersed and relatively hidden.

The downside of the web is its sheer weight of information, but the library profession is beginning to come to grips with the need to maintain information on Australian digital resources, with leadership from the National Library of Australia.

The potential of local collections can be realised with technological support, but this cannot be achieved without financial investment and informed staff. The lack of a national Australian Studies curriculum is also relevant. Without an improved national focus on our history and environment we face less interest from new generations. Libraries are affected by educational shifts.

Some resurgence of historical commitment is needed as our nation's constitution comes under scrutiny and we look toward a more mature society in the twenty-first century. There can be little doubt that such maturity depends on the knowledge that our citizens have of the past and their understanding of their place in the continuum. Properly harnessed, a solid sense of history can create better curricula, improve tourism management, deepen environmental understanding and create a more informed view of our culturally diverse origins. Local studies collections can play a special role in this knowledge process. ■

From overland telegraph, rail, motor vehicles, refrigeration, telephone, television, fax, satellite and the Internet we can trace the battles against distance that have been fought and won...