



# COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES FOR SOCIAL MEMORY

**W**ith this month's INCITE theme being 'Collections', KATHERINE HOWARD selected an article for LIS Investigations that incorporated the collections of our sister institutions: archives and museums. The Phillip Edwards article, based on his PhD research, takes a holistic approach to the collections of libraries, archives and museums\*, suggesting, among other things, that a collaborative approach to collection processes 'may enable collecting institutions to provide a high level of service to patrons'. Despite being over 10 years old, the article raises issues that are yet to be fully investigated.

Edwards's argument centres on the 'social value of objects within collections', and he maintains that decisions about accessioning and de-accessioning are fundamentally important in determining whether those objects are

deemed to have continuing value. If they have value, they enter and/or remain within the collection, or if they are deemed 'valueless' they are removed from the collection. Those documents that are designated as 'archival' are seemingly 'placed ... on the pedestal of national progress, sacred memory, civilisation, history, culture, democracy or social necessity ... and assigned a special status'. (Nesmith, 2004, as cited in Edwards's article). Edwards refers to this as items being transfunctionalised: that the meaning of a document moves toward a socio- or ideofunction as opposed to a technofunction. While the effect that selection/exclusion decisions have on the shaping of social memory and what is considered 'valuable' may not be a new revelation, what is new is Edwards's proposed collaborative solution.

In order to preserve a more holistic view of our social memory, he suggests that a collaborative approach to de-accessioning between libraries, archives and museums is perhaps a better option, arguing that '[w]hen a collecting organization acts in isolation, there is always the potential that some valuable materials will be prematurely lost'. Edwards asks if we, as a collective professional group, 'could align some of our processes and practices in order to better serve the interests of society', given that society has become less interested in where material is housed, only that it can be accessed.

While noting that differences in collecting philosophies can lead to tensions between institutions, Edwards highlights that decisions made at a local, individual institutional level may not be the same as those made collectively. Hence, he advocates for a 'shift in paradigm – from local to societal value judgements'.

Although some of the technological aspects mentioned in the article are now in existence, his overarching tenet is nevertheless still applicable: that the overall social welfare generated from a more collaborative system of collection development and maintenance could prove to be quite significant. Edwards closes the article by appealing to library, archival and museum professionals to rethink how our practices relate to one another, and suggests that viewing current practices through social theoretical constructs may assist us to reshape future practices.

The full text is available to ALIA members via ProQuest database.

Edwards, P. (2004) 'Collection Development and Maintenance across Libraries, Archives and Museums: A novel collaborative approach'. *Library Resources and Technical Services*, 48 (1), pp 26–33.

*\*Museums in the US are inclusive of what Australians refer to as a gallery, hence there is no specific reference to galleries in this article.*

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