Digitisation – success on a shoestring?

# Scoping some issues in sustaining digital collections

Greg Wallace

Greg Wallace DNC Services

Abstract:

This paper scopes the nature of issues faced by smaller institutions with a regional, local or specialist focus located in metropolitan areas as well as in regional, rural and remote communities. As we move towards the establishment of national policies and strategies covering digital collections the nature of the challenges on the ground for these smaller bodies which hold significant elements of the Distribute National Collection needs to be fully considered. The technical issues faced by smaller libraries, archives, museums and galleries overlay different organisational, cultural and social realities to those that prevail in larger institutions. In some ways, institutional diversity is often less apparent, the labels Museum, Gallery, Archive and Library are frequently more fluid. In smaller communities, the distinct areas of expertise and interest of at least several of the collections domains are often represented, they are frequently under the one roof. The broader demands this places on small teams heavily, if not entirely, reliant on volunteers has implications for processes entailed in digitisation, acquisition, preservation, access and use of digital collections. Larger national and state institutions, local government authorities and regional institutions all have the potential to contribute to overcoming these challenges. Collections Australia Network has a central part to play.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today.

I would also like to thank the CCA for arranging this summit and for making it possible for me to be a part of this key step towards establishment of an Australian framework for digital heritage.

DIGITAL COLLECTIONS: ISSUES MAP

Prepared by Darren Peacock for Collections Council of Australia June 2006
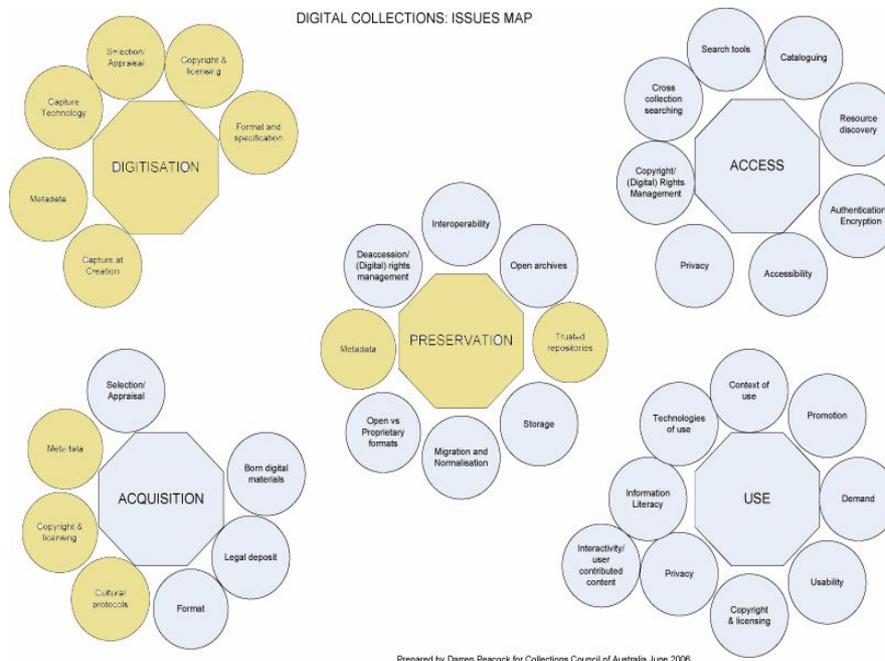
You will find this diagram in the notes in the summit working papers in your satchel – see p21. My focus in this brief presentation is on smaller organisations and issues

surrounding digitisation – there are also of course links to other issues areas but particularly for preservation and acquisition

Context of larger organisations

Before going any further however I would like to start by first considering something about where this audience is coming from.

I need the members you all to help me to illustrate some points –

- Could everyone please stand (The audience of approximately 200 rose to their feet)

- Could you please sit if you are from an organisation that does not have a computer network (very few of the audience, if any, did so).

- Could you please sit if your system manager does not regularly back-up data (very few of the audience if any did so)

Congratulations to those organisations whose staff are still standing – you may now sit.

I would like you to think about what this demonstration illustrates?

- At the end of this exercise more than 95% of this audience remained standing indicating a very high percentage of you are from institutions that have networks which are managed so as to regularly backup data – think about this.

- What enables these regular backups to take place – think about this?

Context of smaller organisations

I would now like to move on to consider the context of smaller collections organisations. The stories that some set out to tell about their collections are very much about the community's identity and in most cases where it has come from.

I am grateful to those involved with Kodja Place for these images that are used to illustrate one example of a small community based organisation's efforts.

The community collections sector by definition includes those organisations which are closest to their communities. It is crucial for each of them to both "get their own mix right" and be valued by their communities.

No community collection organisation can expect to be sustained through this century unless it is valued by the communities it serves.

The technical issues faced by smaller libraries, archives, museums and galleries overlay different organisational, cultural and social realities to those that prevail in larger institutions.

In some ways, institutional diversity is often less apparent, the labels Museum, Gallery, Archive and Library are frequently more fluid.

In smaller communities, the distinct areas of expertise and interest of at least several of the collections domains are often represented - frequently under the one roof.

The broader demands this places on small teams heavily, if not entirely, reliant on volunteers has implications for processes entailed in digitisation, acquisition, preservation, access and use of digital collections.

It is no longer sustainable to expect to rely on training alone as a means of providing organisations the capacity to manage new demands placed on them. There are only so many hats that a person can wear.

Observations on digitisation and smaller organisations

I would now like to make some observations on each of these elements of digitisation from I have seen to be the present perspective of small organisations

Copyright & licensing
As organisations that have had their primary focus on real objects and printed matter move into the digital era copyright and licensing issues have become a challenge for

most. Those that do take necessary steps usually only do so with material specifically required for use with a particular project.

While a number of useful resources are available about what should be done, few smaller organisations are complying due to the time involved and the common belief that it is all too hard.

Format Specification

Few smaller organisations are aware of the significance of different formats. Consideration of which format to use is all too often only considered in terms of the immediate digitisation project at hand.

Selection/Appraisal

Too many organisations still can't accept that if they continue to try to keep everything they will save nothing. A culture prevails in all too many organisations already overwhelmed too many real objects. Unless a concerted effort is made to focus on significance, digital collections with large numbers of items with little significance will continue to accumulate in a similar way as old practices and cultures migrate to new technologies.

Capture Technology

Selection of which technology to use with digitisation is often poorly considered and too frequently just based on what is to hand. The option of outsourcing is sometimes taken up – sometimes there is a risk of data mining by unscrupulous service providers who offer deals that sound too good to be true and usually are.

Metadata

The concept remains a complete mystery to some but is gradually becoming better understood. Blackbox approaches need to be more widely used – where just a "button" can be pushed.

Capture at Creation

This is being pursued by some – particularly in the Art Museum domain and certain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections, some leaders exist in small community bodies such as Pioneer Women's Hut.

Projects tend to become programs through organic growth rather than planning

In 1998 small organisations were at the boundary of a digital frontier. I led a team that developed one of the early training packages to address the needs of people working in or with small collections bodies embarking on the course of digitising images or other media from their collections.

That course stressed that before starting on a digitisation program, the first question to ask was whether an organisation was using digitisation to work with existing collections in different ways or were embarking on the course of creating a new collection – what you might call a virtual collection?

DECIDING HOW TO DO IT BEFORE YOU START
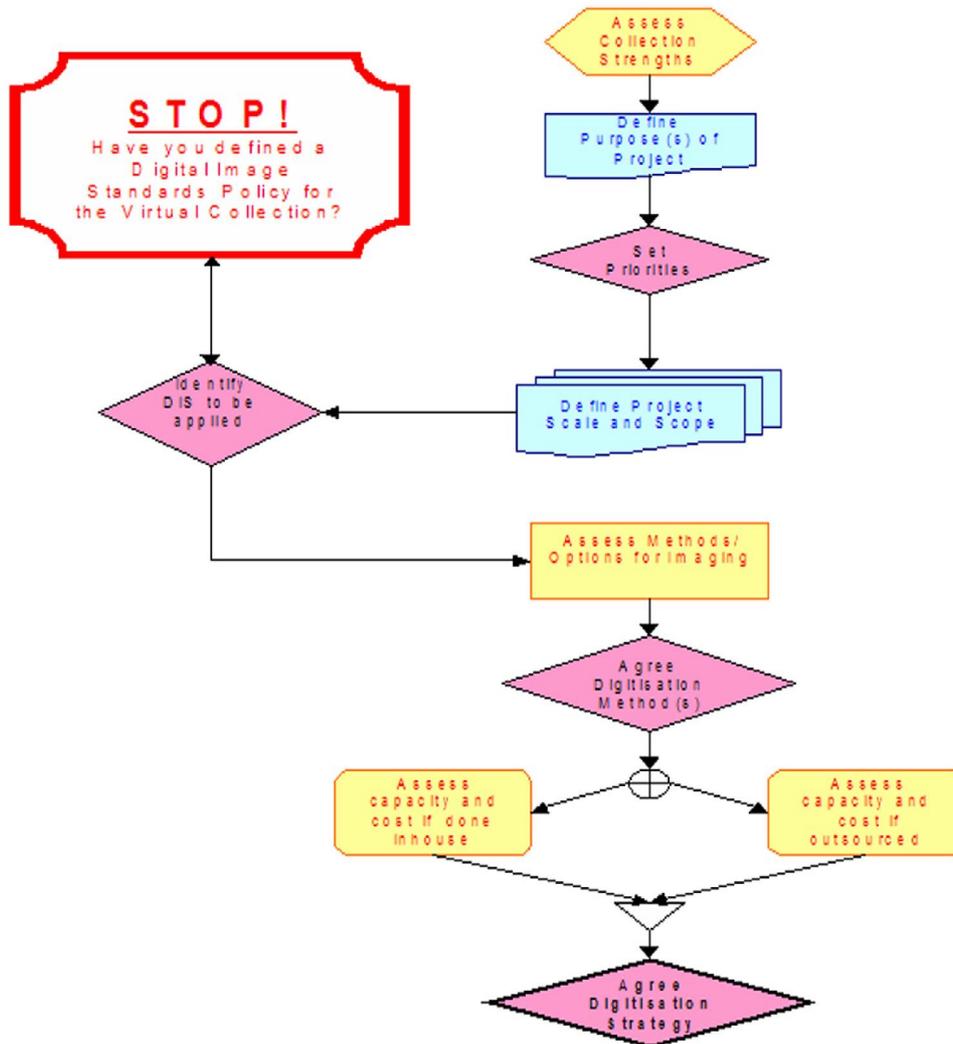
Using this decisionmaking pathway as a tool we emphasised that even when just using existing collections in new ways, organisations needed to recognise that eventually these new initiatives may grow into a new virtual collection. We stressed the need for policy frameworks and standards.

Projects often become programs. Eight years later I have to say that all too often organisations are still not pausing to consider this key issue.

There are now much better training resources available online from the CAN website. Next time you a visit it do a search for "Capture Your Collections". It is a good package that a number of us in Australia and Canada contributed to. Although it is now some years old and well overdue for some updating. This could be a good outcome from this summit.

Process Challenges

Figure 6   Processes in the making of digital collections
Developed by Clare McClelland with assistance from Alan Howell and others, for the Collections Council of Australia Ltd, 2005-2006.
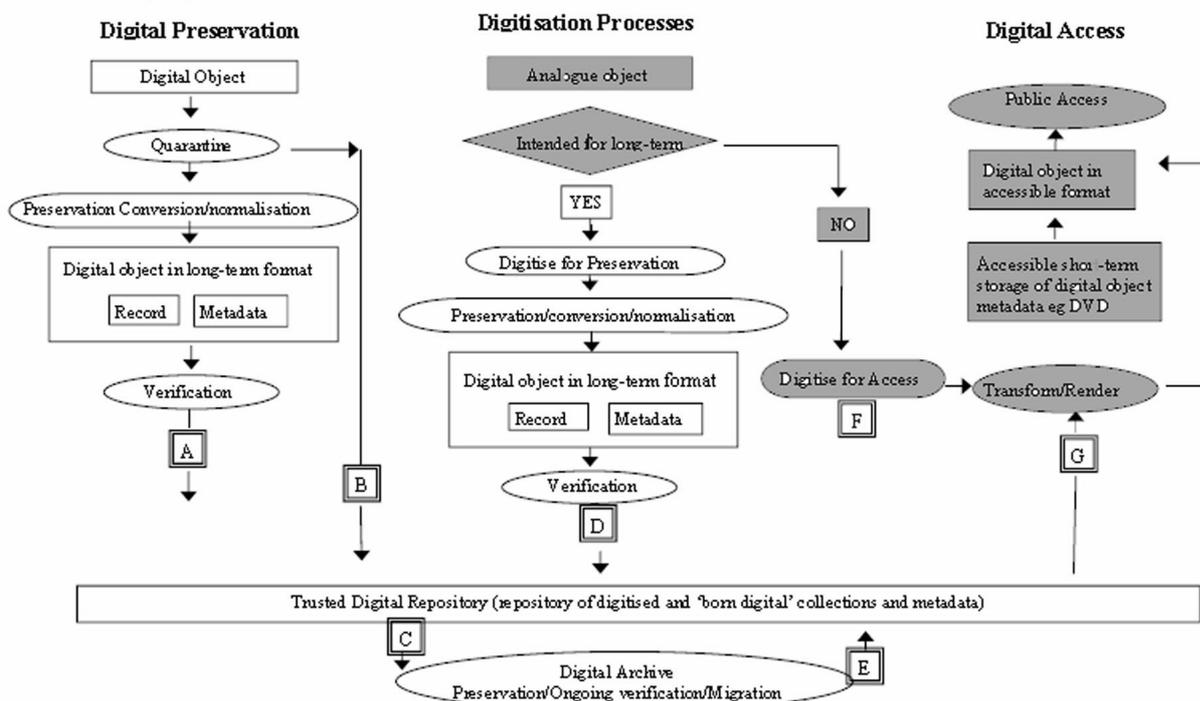
You may recognise this as figure 6 from page 33 of the working papers

I just alluded to the way in which small organisations tended to first become involved in digitisation through projects. Interestingly my colleague Tim Hart in the key presentation from the museum domain made the very same point – mostly about the big end of town.

When small organisations embark on a digitisation project it is my observation that they very frequently follow path F.

If organisations move into ongoing programs and managing digital collections they need to move beyond this approach – all too frequently they don't.

Unfortunately they remain locked into the simplest and quickest rather than the most appropriate process path. This is a real issue.

The era of the digital cliff

Eight years down the track from what was then an era of an emerging digital frontier, many small collections bodies now confront what might be described as a digital cliff. As they approach this precipice there is every chance that digital material both significant and insignificant will be lost forever unless serious issues are addressed.

Organisations which have relied on passive conservation strategies to preserve objects, documents and photographs captured on film can no longer do so. Managing sustainable digital collections relies on active conservation strategies which by their nature are far more demanding of resources.

Even traditional ways of acquiring images will soon disappear. Photographs often passed on to a small organisation in a shoebox where they may have remained neglected for decades were frequently in surprisingly good condition.

New opportunities are also emerging such as digital scrap booking – they have their own challenges. By the way, according to Wikipedia this hobby has surpassed golf in popularity!

Will digital images stored using a superseded medium format still be accessible after a just one decade?

Clearly access to expertise is essential

In some cases digital repositories operated either as partnerships or made available through 3rd parties may provide the most sustainable solutions.

An example of a pre digital strategy that has worked and which could be more widely adapted is the role that AIATSIS has had in archiving collections developed by language centers and other indigenous organisations.

Small organisations and digital preservation

In concluding this paper I would like to use the audience again to illustrate the issues for small organisations that this paper presents.

This exercise is to bring the audience to something like the position many smaller organisations find themselves in by giving you something you can personally relate to. Have you heard the expression – the doctors kids are always sick, the electrician's home wiring is hopeless etc?

- Please stand if you have one or more computers at home (everyone in the audience rose to their feet)

- Please sit if your home computer system has not been backed-up in the last fortnight (almost everyone sat leaving only a handful of those present standing)

  What proportion of the audience was still standing? (Less than 2% appeared to have backed up their home computer recently)

I would like you to think about what this demonstration illustrates. I would like you to think about what would enable you to start regularly backing-up?

We all have very busy lives – it is often very difficult to make the time to do even those things we know we should.

This is a condition that tends to go all the way to the top in Government as well. Governments are great at capital works for new bridges and roads but tend not to be so good or as interested in road maintenance. This is a reality of the human condition that we need to be aware of and strive to overcome if we are to have sustainable digital collections, especially with smaller collections bodies.

I wish to pose two key questions:

- Is it presently feasible to expect a small organisation on their own to manage the complexities of digital preservation?

- What other options are feasible?

I believe that the challenges of operating a sustainable digital repository will probably remain beyond the capacity of most smaller groups unless they have access to support in some way.

Larger national and state institutions can potential play a key role in providing access to expertise. Creative solutions need to be developed to the needs of smaller

organisations. Local government bodies with managed networks and regional libraries, museums and galleries may have future roles as hosts.

The Collections Australia Network will be central to the development of solutions to achieving sustainability for the Distributed National Digital Collection.