From Outpost To Community:

Strengthening support for the Australasian digital preservation community through regional presence

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**Abstract – The digital preservation workforce is dispersed across organizations, roles, and the world. The value of grass-roots communities of practice and membership organizations to support digital preservation work are evident with the success of such initiatives as the Australasia Preserves regional community of practice supporting practitioners in the Australasian region, and the Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC), an international charity that works to secure our digital legacy. With DPC members dispersed across the globe – and across time zones – engagement can be challenging. In March 2020 the DPC and the University of Melbourne commenced a partnership to embark on a two-year investigative project (2020-2021), to establish a staffed office improving access to the DPC’s program of activities for Australasian DPC members and more broadly, digital preservation practitioners in the region such as those participating in the Australasia Preserves community of practice. In early 2022 the DPC announced that this partnership would continue with expansion of the DPC Australasia remit and staffing presence following successful project outcomes. This continuation, the thriving DPC Australasia Stakeholder Group, and the ongoing development of a sustainable business model are undeniable indicators of the success of this project.**

**Keywords – Engagement, Community, Capacity, Partnerships, Collaboration**

**Conference Topics – Community**

# The Challenge And The Opportunity

Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC) membership continues to grow across the world and across sectors, as more and more organizations realize the considerable and urgent challenge to be addressed. The membership includes a range of types of organizations, from galleries, libraries, archives, and museums, through to banks, government agencies, and commercial entities.  Digital preservationists come from diverse professional backgrounds and are, in many cases, facing similar challenges in disparate and isolated environments. The digital record of all organizations grows day by day, and those that have joined the DPC realize the benefit of being part of a network of organizations facing shared challenges.

One of the key benefits of DPC membership is connection with a peer and professional community, whether that be through sharing successes at Connecting the Bits [1], sharing challenges and failures at Digital Preservationists Anonymous [2], or aggregating Rapid Assessment Model (RAM) [3] results to realistically benchmark organisations’ digital preservation capability within a professional community. Maintaining that community across countries, and specifically time zones, can be difficult, especially given the need to build trusted communities of practice.

In January 2018 the DPC embarked on a new strategic plan to prepare the transition to a truly global foundation. That ambition was elaborated in June 2019 with the adoption of an appendix to the strategic plan which recognised that digital preservation is a global concern which needs to be addressed as such. This built upon an interest in inviting international membership, declared from 2016. This commitment indicated that to foster the growth of the global digital preservation community in new markets and geographies, the DPC would be scaled to the extent of the challenge. The DPC’s mission was therefore formally expanded to include the enhancement of members’ experience and the capacity of the digital preservation community around the world through the provision of a stable and trusted platform for collaboration, owned and run for the benefit of the global digital preservation community, and accountable to them through membership.

This is the context and the reason why, from 1st January 2020 to 31st December 2021, the DPC established an exploratory project in partnership with the University of Melbourne (Australia) [4], whose digital preservation program had supported the founding and ongoing success of the Australasia Preserves digital preservation community of practice. This partnership saw the start of increased delivery of the DPC program in the region, while also exploring the requirements of sustainable ongoing operations to meet DPC members’ needs in Australasia. The initiative was implemented through a secondment arrangement, whereby the University of Melbourne provided a part-time member of staff (0.5FTE) to work on 5 strategic goals:

1) Sustain and expand Australasia Preserves, the regional digital preservation community of practice instigated by the University of Melbourne’s digital preservation program

2) Deliver a DPC program in Australasia and surrounding territories

3) Develop self-sustaining membership to support a permanent office

4) Amplify digital preservation activities in Australasia for the benefit of DPC members

5) Amplify the DPC’s messages about the need for and benefits of digital preservation

# Achievements Of DPC Australasia

## Indications Of Success

At the commencement of the partnership in early 2020, plans were in place for events, engagement, and travel throughout the region to fully realize the goals of the project. In March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic greatly disrupted all expected activities. Plans were rapidly redeveloped to take into account the new uncertain reality. Multiple long state-wide lockdowns in Naarm (Melbourne), Victoria, Australia, particularly impacted plans as the DPC Australasia member of staff was required to work from home for the majority of the two-year project period. Closure of the Australian border to international visitors and between states and territories further impacted the ability to connect with DPC staff, DPC members, and the broader community throughout this time.

Despite the pandemic greatly impacting the program delivery and planning for sustainable operations (including inability to travel or hold face-to-face meetings and workshops during 2020-2021 for planning, development, and membership relationship building and expansion), DPC membership in the region grew from 3 to 15 members during the project period. Many achievements were made in each of the project’s five strategic goals.

Support for the Australasia Preserves digital preservation community of practice continued, with community membership growing to over 400 members. Monthly meetups were organized and hosted for the community throughout 2020, moving to quarterly meetups throughout 2021, attracting attendance of 40 to 100 people (varying due to topic and timings), and many of these events are recorded and shared openly with the international digital preservation community on the Australasia Preserves YouTube Channel [5]. A volunteer organizers’ group formed in April 2020 continues to support community activities, growth, and forum management [6]. “Digital Preservation Essentials” training modules were developed by facilitated community working groups [7] in 2020, with these resources made openly available to the broad digital preservation community [8].

The delivery of a DPC program of activities in the Australasian region began, guided by local members’ input and needs. A local work plan was developed collaboratively with regional members in early 2020 to guide ongoing work for the project, and was reviewed and updated for work in the second year of the project (2021). #DPConnect [9] informal networking sessions were hosted in the Australasian time zone, with feedback overwhelmingly positive: “These short and sweet weekly meets have been a lovely way to share an inspiring number of lockdown projects, from getting on with addressing legacy to new work… it’s been great to debrief with like minds whilst achieving some ISO [isolation] relief…very informal, very supportive” (posted on the Australasia Preserves online community forum).

Various events were facilitated and hosted in the Australasian time zone, including a Rapid Assessment Model (RAM) workshop and webinar, web archiving training, briefing day watch parties showcasing recordings of events held in inconvenient time zones, including preservation planning and technology watch, EDRMS preservation, Digital Preservation Futures sessions, and advocacy training.

DPC membership in the region further strengthened a timely and important collaborative response to a regional priority in the higher education sector during the project period. Australian university members of the DPC (the University of Melbourne with input and endorsement from the University of Adelaide, the University of Sydney, and Monash University) wrote a joint digital preservation response statement to the Australian Research Data Commons (ARDC) “Institutional Underpinnings” process (submitted on 14th July 2021). The ARDC-led Institutional Underpinnings program [10] aimed to develop a framework for institutional research data management (RDM) across Australia’s universities, with 25 participating Universities jointly developing a framework. Digital preservation was missing from the draft framework, so the university-based DPC members convened and co-developed a statement as feedback to raise the profile of the digital preservation challenge. The collaborative statement on digital preservation was reviewed by the ARDC Institutional Underpinnings program and framework editorial committee and 25 participating universities, and was accepted as one of 16 essential elements of a developing national framework for institutional research data management. Without the regional activity that DPC Australasia has enabled, and active stakeholder group that it has stimulated, local digital preservation specialists may not have been alert to this opportunity to contribute to an influential initiative, and it would have been significantly harder to elicit such a quick and relevant contribution.

An extensive member needs analysis was also conducted between April and June 2021 to inform and develop the DPC Australasia Organization Development Plan for the DPC in Australasia 2022-2025, beyond the conclusion of the initial project period. This was developed with input from Australasian-based DPC members during 2021: Australia’s Academic and Research Network (AARNet), The National Archives of Australia, The University of Sydney, The University of Adelaide Library, National and State Libraries Australasia, Monash University, Records and Information Management Professionals Australasia (RIMPA), Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Australian Society of Archivists, National Library Board Singapore, Public Records Office Victoria, National Film and Sound Archive, Queensland State Archives, the National Library of New Zealand, and the University of Melbourne. The needs analysis was undertaken collaboratively over three months (April-June 2021), with 13 hours of member consultations (via videoconference), and more than 340 comments captured to guide development of the plan.

The DPC Australasia Organization Development Plan aims to further progress the international strategic objective of the DPC’s strategic plan, and includes forecasts and recommendations based on the best knowledge available in December 2021 and on practical experience. It is therefore also a provisional outline with explicit and implicit assumptions that will be tested and are subject to emerging risks and opportunities.

Consultation with members throughout the development of the plan highlighted the value of a supported local network, with the forward plan highlighting the “keen need to foster connections between other members in the region, especially in order to build trust and enable robust open discussion of digital preservation capacity and approaches in a collegial environment” [11].

# Regional Case Studies

## Case Study: Sole Digital Archivist, Department of Health, Victoria

Working in large organizations in digital preservation can be similarly isolating to those in smaller ones. Transitioning traditionally paper based archival and recordkeeping functions into digital with robust and sustainable preservation workflows requires advocacy, education, and training. Access to the Australasia Preserves Community of Practice and DPC membership through the Australian Society of Archivists has provided this Digital Archivist access to training and resources that would otherwise be unavailable.

The familiar mantra that digitisation is not digital preservation expresses itself frequently when advocating for large collections of paper-based materials. It may not seem analogous however the reality is that many archivists work in hybrid collections and while sustainable digital preservation is a goal, practitioners must take a holistic view of an entire collection and prioritize and justify the areas of greatest need.

Australasia Preserves provides a space for testing ideas and sharing challenges and mistakes so that when practitioners are at the point of making a business case or operationalizing digital preservation workflows much of the macro thinking has already been progressed.

 An example of this has been when working with colleagues in system design. Considerable advocacy and relationship building with these colleagues has shifted the role of Digital Archivist from the person to go to when a system is being retired, to a colleague to involve at the development stage. This has resulted in a true picture of the technology and costs required to maintain information for the whole of its life.

## Case Study: University of Adelaide Library Strategy and Roadmap Development

In mid-2020 the University of Adelaide Library commenced work in earnest to improve digital preservation, as part of our strategic commitment to be leaders in information management [12], by joining the Digital Preservation Coalition and commencing development of a Digital Preservation Strategy and Roadmap. While a cross-organisational working group gathered considerable archival, library and other relevant expertise, organizational digital preservation experience was awareness-level.

Benefits of DPC membership, including access to DPC online resources, technical guidance, and tools such as the rapid assessment model and Novice to Know-how training helped focus the Strategy Working Group considerably and rapidly improved the organization’s maturity as we tackled this challenge.

The Library’s Digital Preservation Strategy and Roadmap was endorsed by the Library Leadership Team and published online in July 2021 [13]. The document was influenced by our participation in the DPC Australasia Stakeholder Group as a peer network. Formally, membership of the DPC provided the Library with feedback on the document before it was finalized. In addition to this, library representatives to the Stakeholder Group had an opportunity to connect with similar sized organizations facing similar challenges in familiar professional and budgetary circumstances. While published case studies are useful research, a trusted peer network and direct connection with equivalent organizations helped us benchmark ourselves even more effectively.

These relationships with like organizations impacted the phasing and timeline of the Library’s Roadmap, as well as influencing how we approach staff upskilling. In the final phase of the Roadmap, the Library will consider implementing a digital preservation system. At the time of writing, the Library has not completed the first phase of the roadmap, but the DPC Stakeholder Group helps us keenly observe the experience of similarly-sized colleague organizations using preservation systems already. The Library is especially interested in the progress of those that are in the early stages of implementing commonly used systems. Their experience will prove a rich supplement to a formal process of systems procurement when the time comes.

# The Future of DPC Australasia

## Looking Forward

The work undertaken during this partnership project has produced one emerging approach for setting up a regional DPC presence – an approach which could potentially be used in other regions to help scale other communities to the global challenge of digital preservation. In early 2022, recruitment was underway for a full-time dedicated Head of Australasia and Asia-Pacific strategic leadership role, a role focussed on continuing to grow the DPC presence and membership sustainably beyond the project period, with human infrastructure support provided by the University of Melbourne for a three-year period, linked into the university’s digital preservation program with its strategic focus of national and international collaboration.

Throughout 2021, DPC members in the Australasian region collaboratively developed a vision, mission, and values to guide ongoing development of the DPC in the region. At this early stage of development, the region of ‘Australasia’ has not been definitively determined, in part due to the lack of standard worldwide consensus as to what is included (without an official definition, Australasian and Asia-Pacific (APAC) countries vary depending on context, with some lists including Russia, the US, Canada, Chile, India, Mongolia, etc). During the project period, it was recognised that wider growth in the region surrounding Australia will depend on local initiatives and resourcing to seed new chapters of the DPC, while many factors including cultural distinctions, language diversity, further time zone challenges, and differing vision, mission, and values may emerge and require addressing in local contexts. As the DPC in Australasia initiative further develops in 2022 and beyond, it is expected these subjects of name, context, and regional definition will further evolve as part of the DPC’s ongoing international strategy development.

DPC members in the Australasian region have expressed a keen need to foster further connections with other members in the region, especially in order to expand trusted networks and enable robust open discussion of digital preservation capacity and approaches in a collegial environment. For this reason, additional staff duties have been identified in the DPC Australasia Organization Development Plan and prioritized to meet this fundamental need. In addition to a strategic leadership role responsible for coordination, planning, research and development, other recommended staff duties for prioritizing in the Australasian region include workforce development and skills/training expertise, and communication, events, and administration expertise.

In terms of facilitating broader, more systemic advocacy for digital preservation in the Australasian and Asia-Pacific regions, it has been recognised this endeavor will require larger institutions and organizations becoming involved who have comprehensive reach and understanding of the current environments. This goal could potentially also be achieved aided by more dedicated resourcing of communication and strategic guidance and expertise for DPC operations in Australasia as this initiative further grows and matures. In any case, digital preservation capacity and advocacy has been greatly enhanced through this partnership, through the project period (2020-2021), and is expected to further contribute to regional capability to secure our digital legacy in the coming years.

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