

Senate inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy

Submission from National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA)

30 September 2019

National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA)¹ welcomes this inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy in Australia.

NSLA is the peak body for Australia's national, state and territory libraries. Our libraries hold rich collections that serve the education, research, innovation and cultural needs of Australians every day. In 2018-2019, we welcomed 9.5 million visitors. Online visits to our library catalogues and websites, including the Trove national discovery service, reached 58.7 million. Our collections, including every Australian publication available under legal deposit legislation, were valued at \$4.1 billion.

Libraries as trusted public institutions

The discussion paper accompanying this Senate inquiry notes an overall decline in public trust in major institutions in Australia, with the exception of the armed forces, the public service and the courts. Libraries merit particular mention as another notable exception, as they continue to engender and enjoy very high levels of public trust, playing a vital role in building social cohesion and fostering civic participation across Australia.

A recent report in *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* found that "if attendance figures are any indication, the public library is our most valued cultural institution".² Public libraries stood apart from other institutions such as galleries, museums and theatres because of the very high number of repeat visits, with one third of patrons returning over ten times during the year.

Libraries can be counted among Australia's most democratic institutions. Admission is free and open to all, regardless of background, wealth or status. Information is uncensored and publications made available based on principles of universal access. Privacy is respected, with patrons at liberty to use collections for their own purposes, free from interrogation. Visitors are treated with respect regardless of age, ethnicity, gender or political persuasion. Programs and collections reflect the diversity of the population. Onsite and online mechanisms for discovery and delivery of collections are designed to reach all Australians regardless of income, location, or level of education.

Today trusted information sources are increasingly important, and increasingly difficult to identify. We know that the internet has provided us with a vast collection of resources, a "firehose of information" in the words of author Peter Greste³, that is as rich and varied as it is unfathomable.

¹ nsla.org.au

² Jane Cadzow (28 September 2019), "The unlikely renaissance of libraries in the digital age", <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/one-for-the-books-the-unlikely-renaissance-of-libraries-in-the-digital-age-20190923-p52u0j.html>

³ Speech delivered for launch of National edeposit (NED), National Library of Australia, 16 August 2019.

Seeking reliable information about anything from history and science to government policy and current affairs can be overwhelming and time-consuming. Libraries play a vital role not only as trusted repositories of information in this environment, but as interpreters of it. In 2018-2019, librarians in the nine NSLA libraries alone answered 239,000 research enquiries.

A 2016 Pew Research Center study found that eight in ten American adults “feel that public libraries help them find information that is trustworthy and reliable”.⁴ This view was particularly strong within the Millennial generation, and was attributed to the non-partisanship of libraries as well as their service ethic and perceived support for intellectual freedom and community engagement.

NSLA libraries report very high levels of public confidence among their clients. In a survey of 1,000 clients of Libraries Tasmania, for example, 93% of respondents said the institution was “honest and reliable”, and 95% said it was “safe and accessible”.⁵ A survey administered for Transport Canberra and City Services found 87% of clients at Libraries ACT felt it provided “a safe and happy environment that promotes life-long learning”, and 85% that it provided “a vital service to neighbourhoods and communities across Canberra”.⁶

An independent survey of more than 1,000 Australians across the nation found that 66% of respondents had a very high level of trust in the National Library of Australia. This is twice the percentage of respondents who had visited or used the National Library, suggesting that Australians have a strong sense of the integrity of the broader Australian library system. It is also more than twice the trust level in Federal Government reported by IPSOS in December 2018, suggesting that libraries are trusted more highly than other arms of government.

Libraries and national identity

NSLA libraries share the vision of the National Library of Australia “to connect all Australians with national collections, enriching conversations about who we are and our place in the world”.⁷ As custodians of national, state and territory collections, our collection development policies are designed to address historical bias and to ensure that we continue to collect in a way that reflects population changes, including new migrant communities.

In line with our library and museum sector colleagues, NSLA libraries have invested in a strengthened collective effort to manage Indigenous collections in culturally appropriate ways, with a commitment to work with Indigenous communities, increase the number of Indigenous staff in our libraries, and provide spaces that are welcoming to Indigenous visitors. All non-Indigenous staff are undergoing cultural competency training, with further training for collections staff in recognition of Indigenous intellectual property, engaging with Indigenous communities, handling secret and sacred materials, and describing collection items in a way that improves discoverability for Indigenous communities.

In 2019, NSLA libraries launched the National edeposit service (NED), a world-first collaboration for the library sector. Supported by federal legal deposit legislation, NED builds on our 19th and 20th

⁴ Pew Research Center (30 August 2017), “Most Americans – especially Millennials – say libraries can help them find reliable, trustworthy information”, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/30/most-americans-especially-millennials-say-libraries-can-help-them-find-reliable-trustworthy-information/>

⁵ LINC Tasmania (June 2014), “LINC Tasmania Client Survey: Research Report 2014”, <https://libraries.tas.gov.au>

⁶ Transport Canberra and City Services (2019), “Perceptions of ACT Government libraries” in *TCCS Community Survey*, https://www.tccs.act.gov.au/about-us/community_engagement.

⁷ National Library of Australia, “Corporate Plan 2019-2020”, <https://www.nla.gov.au/content/corporate-plan-2019-20-covering-reporting-periods-2019-20-to-2022-23>

century print collections by collecting, preserving and providing access to all Australian electronic publications – capturing the digital documentary heritage of Australia. Within its first three months of operation, over 8,000 Australian publications were deposited into NED. A large percentage of the collection is accessible to the Australian public directly from home.

The sheer variety of publications collected through the NED service tells a story about Australian national identity. Prime Minister’s Literary Award winner *John Curtin’s War* by John Edwards, for example, sits alongside the government’s *Antarctic Strategy and 20 Year Action Plan* and a newsletter from the Perth Vintage Wireless and Gramophone Club.

The ethos that drives NED and indeed all NSLA collecting activity is to represent Australia as we are, not as we might wish to be perceived. Our preparedness as a nation to collect and preserve the less palatable aspects of our history and culture is one of the clearest demonstrations of confidence in our national identity and in our democracy.

In addition to our democratic *modus operandi*, NSLA libraries contribute to national identity by documenting the democratic process itself. We house comprehensive collections of political ephemera, election campaign materials, speeches, monographs and political treatises. No scholar of Australian political history or process could pursue the subject without consulting these collections.

Civic engagement in libraries

Libraries are recognised as safe spaces where any subject may be broached, ideas can be tested and uncomfortable conversations explored. They exist for every member of the community.

Every day of the week, libraries are facilitating some form of civic engagement, whether it be a public lecture on the life of Alfred Deakin, a poetry slam, a beginners course in the Noongar language, a pop-up art class, an exhibition on the history of the Palm Island Reserve, a workshop on family history research, or a display on the origins of the Ashes cricket series.

Our digital spaces continue to be developed with the same principles in mind, providing platforms for respectful civic engagement that will inform, connect and inspire. The State Library of Queensland enjoyed great success this year with its *Home: A Suburban Obsession* exhibition, for example, based on 60,000 photographs of Queensland homes by Frank and Eunice Corley. The exhibition featured a visualisation and tagging tool open to the public, resulting in the generation of tens of thousands of tags, comments and photographs which have enhanced catalogue records for the underlying collection and fostered a sense of community between Queenslanders from Bundaberg to Beenleigh.

The contribution of libraries in strengthening civic engagement and shaping national identity cannot be overstated. We support the submission to this inquiry made by colleagues at the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), and ask that the role of libraries be considered in any subsequent committee report.

Dr Marie-Louise Ayres
Director-General, National Library of Australia
Acting Chair, National and State Libraries Australia
www.nsla.org.au
nsla@slv.vic.gov.au