Transmission Interrupted
—Renewing Education and Heritage

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Imagine walking into a museum exhibition—say, a display of archival materials connected to the personal and public life of former Australian Prime Minister John Curtin—only to encounter hundreds of items laid out across dozens of tables and according to no discernible logic. A 1985 Australia Post First Day Cover commemorating the birth centenaries of Curtin and former Australian Prime Minister Ben Chiefly sits next to an unpublished paper on the foundations of foreign policy, written by Kim E. Beazley in 1969 for the University Branch of the Australian Labor Party. Next to the manuscript: a shell dressing pack, originally issued to an Australian soldier during the Vietnam War, and now the personal possession of Heather Campbell. Alongside the dressing lies a photograph, taken in 1992, of then Curtin University Vice Chancellor John Maloney standing next to then US President George Bush. Next to that, a collection of *District Annual Reports* (1922-45) of the Western Australian branch of the Australian Journalists' Association—and so on. No pamphlet or exhibition catalogue is available at the exhibition entry, and around the room no text is visible other than the so-called 'didactic panels' detailing the title, creator, date and material properties of each item.

What would one hope to glean from such a showcase? Where would one even begin to browse the items on display?

Imagine, further, entering not a specific exhibition—which would have the virtue at least of being organised around a particular figure or theme—but rather a building that housed the entire holdings of a cultural heritage institution, such as the National Archives of Australia, an expansive warehouse filled with shelf after shelf of boxes on top of boxes containing thousands, even millions, of documents and institutional records. Or, indeed, imagine taking a trip with friends or family to the National Museum of Australia only to be stopped at a nondescript counter at the building's entrance and asked to identify by title or creator the particular items or exhibits that you wished to see.

'Electronic access'

Each of these scenarios sounds increasingly absurd, to be sure. Yet each serves in its own way as an instructive—and not too far fetched—analogy for the most readily imaginable strategy for increasing access to heritage collections by 'digitising' those collections and making them available online.[1] The 'move' online for national and cultural heritage institutions seems not just a perfectly natural step, keeping in line with the digital transformations sweeping every other aspect of the contemporary world, but also a strategically important one for the furtherance of those institutions' cultural mission. Certainly, in the context of a world in which online access to information and cultural knowledge is utterly everyday, the need to generate an 'online presence' is paramount if heritage institutions are to retain (or at least vie for) their traditional role as key sites of civic, national and cultural education. But, further, digitisation appears to be an obvious solution to the challenges of preserving archival materials and enabling their use by a geographically dispersed population. When your collection is online, your artefacts are preserved forever and your user-base is nothing short of the global population.[2] But what kind of visitor, what kind of user, could hope to navigate or make use of such digital archives, shorn (as they often are) of any meaningful way into them? What *kind* of access is promised here?

A second scenario, or set of contrasting scenarios. Picture, first, several dozens of university students (stereotypically 'Gen-Y', raised on a cultural diet of television, computer games, online social media and text-messaging) sitting in a lecture theatre, terminally bored (more interested in updating their Facebook statuses than in engaging with prescribed readings from the textbook) as a professor stands at the front of the room, discoursing to this unappreciative crowd on issues and ideas central to the course that these students presumably elected to enrol in. Imagine then a new media transformation! As if by magic, those same unenthusiastic students become uncharacteristically animated and driven as they watch the same professor saying the same things, only in a 50-minute video streaming on YouTube. Meanwhile, hardcopy textbooks, spines uncracked, lay on desks or left in bookshop carrier bags, as 'digital-native' Gen-Y students fill their computer screens with PDF versions of journal articles and Google book previews of

academic monographs.

If the Gen-Y stereotype used here is easily denounced as crass and cartoonish, the caricature serves to highlight all the more the fantasy expressed in the faith that online distribution of 'content' paves the way for global, universal access to higher education. There's a lot more to the 'delivery' of 'content', in other words, than the media of dissemination. We now have Massively Open Online Courses, as they're called (see Tovey, 'Australian'). But didn't cultural studies teach us long ago to beware the myth of 'the mass' (see Swingewood, *Myth*)? Even if there were such a thing as the 'digital native', the question to be asked in any attempt to renew education and heritage in the digital age would concern what (such) people *do* in (such) digital environments, and what education and heritage would have to *become* in order to appear as natural features of those environments. What possibilities do digital and networked communications technologies offer for promoting *use* of such cultural resources and to what extent are these possibilities concordant with the 'mission' of state-supported institutions of culture? And, perhaps more to the point, what exactly *counts* as access to education or heritage—indeed, what may count as heritage and education themselves—in a world defined not just by online *technologies*, but also by an ensemble of cultural, communicative and interactive *practices* enabled by such technologies (Hartley et al., 'DIY', 568)?

If online platforms are imagined not just as a set of technologies but as a repertoire of cultural skills and practices, then the question of renewing education and heritage in the digital age would surely concern the match or otherwise between existing practices of cultural consumption and our available models of instruction and knowledge dissemination. The political objective of providing 'access' would become, in other words, the marketing problem of how to reach a potentially uninterested audience—though, in that sense, the call for renewal isn't entirely new. Accordingly, what must be transformed in any such renewal is not simply the technological means by which ideas and culture are made available to the public-at-large, but more significantly the very ideas of education and heritage themselves. These ideas 'must be transformed', moreover, because in fact they already are being transformed—with or without the development of collections digitisation policies, and with or without an embrace of the online learning agenda. And to the extent that the ideals or activities that make up education and heritage have had their authority and their presumed intrinsic value as public goods eroded by the irresistible forces of consumerism, it's no good trying to pry people away from their televisions and shopping centres—or, increasingly, from their social media sites and social networking profiles—by simply telling them that they *ought* to care more about the kinds of knowledge that schools and museums have to offer.

What new media and social networking operations like Facebook and YouTube are good at is finding ways of connecting with audiences (often by allowing those consumers to connect with each other, but that's not the salient point here). Significantly, these organisations do so by understanding audiences as cultural consumers, where 'consumer' in this context names a kind of relationship with 'content' (or 'commodities' or 'services') that is to be distinguished not so much from the 'producer'—after all, the new media revolution is supposedly one that transforms all media consumers into media 'produsers' (see Bruns, 'Produsage')—as from the 'addressee'. Addressees, that is, are spoken to; they sit at the receiving end of a communication that they did not necessarily ask for, nor necessarily have any prior interest in. Consumers, by contrast, are given offers and options; they are accorded a kind of respect in the form of an acknowledgement and acceptance both of their capacity to choose and of the legitimacy of their reasons for choosing this way or that.[3] And so the onus in this type of address is on the commodity or content producer to satisfy the desires of the consumer, rather than on the addressee of a given institution (the educational institution, for example) to connect with the content provided, and to refrain from disconnecting from the process altogether.

In some ways, the point is so obvious that it hardly needs to be said: education and heritage have been made over, willingly or no, by the mechanisms and imperatives of consumerism. And in that respect new communications technologies haven't given modern audiences (students, citizens, users) a newfound capacity to choose and interact so much as made their existing inclinations, choices and decision-making practices more visible than ever. Accordingly, the difficulty facing education and heritage 'service providers' today is the need to compete against so many other cultural industries (among other would-be claimants on people's limited time and money), such as the film industry, television networks, radio, music, newspapers and books—and, of course, the Internet. Bound by the need to fulfil at least some version of their traditional

social missions, moreover, the challenge for these public institutions is to find ways of appealing to 'cultural consumers' without giving over entirely to the temptation to chase ratings, so to speak—to reduce appeal purely to what consumers find appealing.

Inspiration in this regard might be found in an unlikely source: Facebook co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's widely publicised commitment to 'global openness' (see Kirkpatrick, *Facebook*) and his willingness to actualise that ideal—often in the face of protests from many Facebook users—by instituting 'public' and 'share' as default user-account settings for new features as they are added to the site, effectively hardwiring 'openness' into the Facebook platform.[4] The lesson to be gleaned here isn't so much that market dominance grants corporations hegemonic power—hardly a novel insight, even were it adequate to the complexities of the social and communicative situation—but rather that communications platforms and content distribution systems are neither neutral nor transparent. The *means* by which people are able to 'distribute' or 'access' 'content' (to use a language that no longer seems quite appropriate)—which is to say (in a more contemporary language) the *interfaces* between users and content—not only furrow pathways to that content (see Briggs, 'Silent Television'), channelling or directing users to this or that destination, but also allow or encourage specific forms of user interaction, engagement and behaviour—thereby cultivating certain kinds of disposition and agency, or particular regimes of practice (to use a more Foucauldian language).[5]

In view of that fact, the key questions in the renewal of education and heritage become not 'How do we get more people to access our content?', but 'Why, at a fundamental level, are heritage and education important? What particular attributes or dispositions do we hope that people, ideally, will get from such "public goods"? And—crucially—how might we "hardwire" these ideals into forms of connection and communication with culture and ideas of *all* kinds—forms of connection and communication which we might *then* call "education", etc. regardless of where they might take place?'.

Whatever the possible answers to these questions it is clear that the task of renewing education and heritage, in the sense that 'something has to be done', is a demand received first and foremost by professionals working within the public institutions under scrutiny—the museum, the library, the university— rather than by their intended 'audiences'. Ultimately, what is highlighted by the scenarios with which I began is the extent to which debate over the renewal of heritage and education on the basis of digital technologies is so often underpinned by a notion of cultural transmission, or content delivery, from sender to recipient, as though education and heritage were the preserve solely of public institutions such as the university or the museum—as though 'education' couldn't also describe the teaching and learning that occur via media, advertising and popular culture, or the way we learn from our peers via social networking (offline as well as online); and as though YouTube, with its billions of hours of video uploaded each month, weren't itself the world's most successful heritage collection agency.

At any rate, if the point of providing access to heritage and education is the fulfilment of a democratic objective—bringing knowledge to 'the people'—then perhaps the renewal of such activities might lie equally in bringing 'the people' into knowledge: opening up an idea of knowledge to include *popular* memory and *popular* meaning. Such a move would at least have the virtue of recognising that education and cultural exhibition flow in more than one direction—not just from heritage or education professional to everyday citizen, but also back again. And so a final question or challenge presents itself: to what extent and in what ways can the *professions* of education, curation and heritage collection broaden the institutional scope of their domains to treat these 'unofficial' sites of learning and repository not only as contexts but also as means and as objects of a renewed approach to education and heritage?

Notes

1. The impetus for this discussion came during the early stages of conversations with John Hartley and Niall Lucy over a potential research project on the possible uses of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial collection held at Curtin University, and particularly over the apparent need to 'shift' the collection 'online'. A quick search led to the discovery that the collection had already been digitised and was available through the

Curtin University Library website—indeed, the artefacts described in the opening paragraph of this discussion all feature within the collection—but also that a way into the collection, so to speak, particularly for the non-specialist or non-researcher, was far from intuitive or immediately obvious (see Hartley et al., 'DIY'). #back

2. The rationale sketched out here picks up on objectives listed in the digitisation policies of many Australian heritage collection agencies. For instance, the National Library of Australia's 'Collection Digitisation Policy' cites the following four reasons for digitising its collection: to 'enable people, regardless of location, to directly access … collection materials without having to visit the library'; to 'preserve rare and fragile collections'; 'to support research and the Library's education, publishing and exhibition programs'; and to 'engage with new audiences … including those who employ social networking and other new technologies'. #back

3. This is not to say that the position of the consumer isn't itself a function of address (see Thwaites, 'Three Ways'; 'Bound'). I'm concerned here not with wrenching otherwise 'autonomous' individuals free from the ideological grip of state institutions, but rather with assessing the respective capacities afforded by different modes of address in terms of their potential to be reconciled with the user-capacities 'offered' by discourses about new communications technologies. #back

4. In his keynote address for Facebook's 2011 *F8* conference for developers, Zuckerberg declared that 'the default is now social'. See also his interview with *TechCrunch*'s Mike Arrington. In response to Facebook's increasing insistence on sharing as a default and other privacy issues, a number users have announced their intentions to 'quit Facebook', with some going so far as to trying to establish a 'Quit Facebook Day'. #back

5. See Jarrett ('Perfect') for an example of how the features of an online platform can 'serve to discipline users, in the sense deployed by Michel Foucault, into a regime of practice' (108). Jarrett's study provides a remarkable analysis of the linguistic, organisational, commercial and technological features of eBay and their role in 'interpellating eBayers as individuals with a sense of autonomy, choice and self-direction' and in effecting 'a "responsibilization" of consumers in terms of community standards and community-directed surveillance' (114). #back

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