

Slouching towards Calvary: Whereto the national collection?

Paul Genoni

*School of Media and Information
Curtin University of Technology*

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of recent cooperative collecting activity in Australia, particularly with regard to the concept of a 'national collection'. It considers the reasons for the failure of the Distributed National Collection, including discussion of the roles played by the National Library and libraries operating under the auspices of the Council of Australian University Librarians during the 1990s. It concludes by advocating a way forward with regard to the continued development and implementation of a national collecting agenda.

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Although the sub-title of this paper, 'whereto the national collection' addresses the future, it is appropriate to begin by looking backwards and recalling that the notion of the national collection in the recent past has been virtually synonymous with the Distributed National Collection (DNC).

It isn't necessary to revisit the debate surrounding the DNC in detail, but it is worth briefly recalling some of the issues that drove its original acceptance. They included:

- the ever increasing volume of published material,
- the high inflation rates of most forms of publishing but the academic serial in particular, a phenomenon which has been exacerbated by the long term decline in the value of the Australian dollar,
- the acceptance that no Australian library could afford any more than a small proportion of the total published output, to the point where self-sufficiency was simply not achievable,
- the emergence of new forms of information technology which enabled the more rapid, cheaper and higher quality transmission of documents and images.

The importance of acknowledging these influences on the conceptualisation of the DNC is that it is apparent that each of these conditions or issues is still impacting upon the development of library collections and services to this day. Indeed it could be argued that the effect of each of them is being felt more keenly in 2000 than was the case when the DNC concept was first accepted at the Australian Libraries Summit meeting of 1988.

It was these issues which created an environment in which many libraries were prepared to explore the advantages of cooperative collecting policies and to acknowledge the existence of the 'national collection'. In the form of the DNC this was to be a national collection which

was more than an *ad hoc* outcome of the obvious fact that all the nation's collections could in some sense be said to form a supra-collection, but rather a collection that could be subject to the usual disciplines of planning, development and management that apply to the collection of a single library. Agreement on the detail of the DNC may not have been unanimous, but the general acceptance of the validity of the concept was clear.

Following the Australian Libraries Summit there were a series of further meetings which served to focus discussion and set an agenda for DNC related activity. These included the Acquisitions Seminar held in conjunction with the ALIA Conference in 1990, the Towards Federation 2001 meeting (1992), the Distributed National Collection Colloquium (1993), and the National Scholarly Communications Forum Round Table No 7 on the DNC held in 1997.

By the time this last meeting was held, however, there was a recognition that we were entering the post-DNC era. The title of Alex Byrne's address delivered at that meeting, 'After the DNC', indicates something of the elegiac air which permeated several of the contributions.¹ There was a sense that the DNC as it had been initially conceived belonged to an earlier era.

'Failure' of the DNC

Why then did the momentum fail? Why is it that not only the DNC but, it could be argued, the whole notion of coordinated cross sectoral cooperative collecting or a national collecting policy, have largely fallen from favour? There have been numerous contributing factors, but some of the most obvious include:

- the continued developments in information technologies, particularly with regard to the ability to store and transmit high quality digitised copy. This has eroded the necessity or advantage of having copy delivered from a geographically proximate source. In other words, we now have an international distributed collection,
- the emergence of dedicated commercial document delivery services providing guaranteed delivery times and competitive pricing has seen a decreased reliance on the library sector for the sourcing of documents, particularly journal articles,
- the realities of triennium funding in the higher education sector, coupled with increased accountability which has required library managers to make local, short-term service provision their priority, rather than being allowed the option of contributing to shared collecting agendas which pursue goals that are both longer term and not always of direct benefit to primary users of a participating library,
- the continued emergence of a service orientation which has generally diminished the importance of 'collections'.

It should also be noted, that just as the forces which led to the adoption of the DNC are still with us, so too are those which led to its failure.

It is apparent, however, that it is far too simplistic to view the DNC as being the victim of any particular trend or force, be it technological determinism, economic rationalism or globalisation, and that at least some of the reasons for its failure can be found within our professional practice.

Broad based collecting agendas, both in Australia and overseas, have suffered from a hesitancy about collaboration. That is, libraries do have a good record of cooperation where there is a clear mutual benefit for all parties, but the effective implementation of the DNC required a much deeper commitment to collaboration, perhaps even agreement to surrender some autonomy and in certain cases give priority to the national interest. What resulted was a reluctance to deal with issues regarding the content of the DNC. Advances were made with regard to infrastructure, particularly the additions to the National Bibliographic Database, the beginnings of the Conspectus database, and improvements to the management of the inter library loan network, but there were very few significant agreements reached about the distribution of content within the DNC framework.

It is also apparent that the DNC failed to make the transition from the print to the digital environment. As early as the 1993 Distributed National Collection Colloquium Alison Crook had raised the issue of the need to develop an 'electronic DNC'.² The concept of the DNC has remained, however, firmly enmeshed with ownership of the physical object. While other forms of library cooperation, in particular those involving access to bibliographic data and to non-returnable copy, have been transformed by digital technology, there has been little headway made in bringing about similar transformations in the forms of collaboration needed to reinvent the DNC. The complexity and dynamism of the issues raised by the digital creation, storage and transfer of information, and the implications these issues have for the concept of ownership, have prevented any serious attempt to re-define the notion of a 'national collection'.

This task of creating a distributed electronic collection on a national scale has been addressed elsewhere. The United Kingdom now boasts the Distributed National Electronic Resource (DNER), functioning under the auspices of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). It is worth noting, as JISC's Chris Rusbridge has recently explained, that the concept of the DNER was based on Australia's experience with the DNC.³

There were also other local factors which contributed to the failure of the DNC. Amongst these we could include forces at play within the major research institutions, represented by the National Library of Australia (NLA) and the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), the two bodies which had been expected to underpin the national collecting activity.

National Library

The DNC reached something of an apogee in March 1993 with the Distributed National Collection Colloquium held at the Barr Smith Library. General support was given for the DNC concept by the representatives of university, state and other libraries present at the meeting, and they called upon the National Library to take a coordinating role. As a result of this recommendation, the DNC Office became operational at the National Library in 1994.

In retrospect the decision to locate the management of DNC activity at the National Library may have been an unfortunate piece of timing. The National Library was about to enter a period of financial restrictions which served to focus the Library's attention on its own collecting activities, and which also served to undermine its capacity to provide logistical support and leadership to the national collecting agenda. At the same time, many of the resources of the National Library were in the process of being redirected to the task of replacing the aging ABN. The World One and Kinetica projects were massive and sometimes

troubled undertakings for the Library, which understandably diminished both resources and energies that may have otherwise gone to other projects.

Although there is no record of a decision to end commitment to the DNC, it seems to have been slowly diminished by the shortage of resources and perhaps a growing frustration at the lack of progress. The NLA Annual Reports for 1994-95 and 1995-1996 included accounts of the activities of the DNC Office. By the Annual Report covering the years 1996-1997, however, the only mention of the DNC was to note that the DNC Office had been collapsed with several related functions to become part of the National Initiatives and Coordination Office (NIAC). NIAC has itself been since disbanded, and there are no references to the DNC remaining on the National Library website.

Further evidence of the National Library's changing priorities with regard to playing a leadership role for the DNC can also be found in the failure to pursue the resolutions reached at the Towards Federation 2001 meeting. Most of the recommendations were in the areas of collecting, preservation and bibliographic services, and as such were directly related to the national collecting goals. The original intention was that work on these initiatives would continue up unto a major review to be conducted in 2001. All work on these recommendations had, however, virtually ceased by the end of 1996. The reasons given were that 'excellent progress' had already been made, and perhaps more to the point, that the National Library was now working with 'tighter budget restrictions'.⁴

It is also worth noting that the cessation of work on the TF 2001 agenda also saw the demise of the [Working Group on High Priority Cross Sectoral Projects](#) which brought together representatives of the NLA, CAUL, and the Council of Australian State Libraries. It was at that stage one of the few bodies that brought together a representative group from the nation's major collecting libraries in a forum designed to address collection issues.

While discussing the National Library it is also relevant to note the demise of the Australian Council of Libraries and Information Services (ACLIS). ACLIS had been aligned with the National Library as a dedicated promoter and enabler of the DNC, and its cessation of activity in 1999 meant that a number of collecting programs lost valuable support. The intention was that ALIA would pick up some of the collecting and bibliographic related tasks that had previously been the responsibility of ACLIS, but to date this has not been the case.

CAUL

University libraries passed responsibility for the DNC to the National Library at a time when the CAUL members also faced severely growing pressure. The issues which had initially forced consideration of the DNC compounded into the phenomenon referred to as the scholarly information crisis. Without wishing to deal with this 'crisis' in detail, some of its impact on the collecting environment in which academic libraries now operate should be noted. These include:

- the increasing acquisition of electronic serials, and issues dealing with the integration of print based collections with those which are 'born digital' or become digital,
- the acquisition of aggregated data sets, often at the expense of subscriptions to a collection of individual titles,

- the emergence of licensing arrangements which have fundamentally altered what it means for a library to ‘own’ information,
- the use of consortia as a means of delivering buying power and countering the market strength of publishers and aggregators,
- the contracting number of publishers and suppliers, nervous about maintaining their market share and unsure of how to operate in the transformed information environment.

Some of the responses to the scholarly information crisis, particularly those involving buying consortia, have continued to support forms of cooperation. Indeed collaboration and partnership have become watchwords amongst academic libraries. To quote from the current CAUL strategic plan:

The key trends are global in their scope. No individual university library can face them alone.

Collaboration and partnership are therefore themes that run throughout this Strategic Plan. Some partnerships will be local; others based on a particular community of interest.⁵

Understandably in the case of CAUL these partnerships will be formed principally among the higher education sector libraries. Within CAUL there has emerged a number of bilateral and multilateral alliances, based as the wording of the strategic plan indicates, on some form of regional or sectoral interests. Examples of the former include UNISON in New South Wales, CAVAL in Victoria, and WAGUL in Western Australia; and the latter style of partnerships are represented by the Group of Eight libraries, the ATN libraries, and the informal association of the ‘gum tree university’ libraries of Murdoch, Flinders, Griffith, Monash, and Macquarie.

What has eventuated is a simultaneous amalgamation and fragmentation. Libraries have drawn strength by identifying with CAUL as their national sectoral representative body, but they have increasingly associated in smaller groups which reflect something of the differences which exist within that body. Due to the expansion of the higher education sector CAUL is a far more disparate group than when the DNC was first embraced, and the move to form new partnerships is indicative of a decline in the importance of national goals and the emergence of issues related to securing the future of particular institutions.

Whereas it could once be assumed that the collecting activity of the university libraries, irrespective of how well coordinated it was, would contribute to an improvement in the national collection, this is no longer the case. It needs to be acknowledged that some of the collecting activities supported by the consortia operating within CAUL may conflict with the intentions of the DNC. That is, they have involved the acquisition of shared data-sets at the expense of narrowly and perhaps uniquely held titles; they may involve licence agreements which prevent copying and distribution beyond consortia members or individual libraries; and they may have authentication requirements which likewise restrict general user access.

The consortia based acquisition of large-scale data-sets will undoubtedly have an homogenising effect on the nation’s research collections which mitigates against the previously desired aim of diversity. Whereas the thrust of the national collecting agenda as it emerged in the late 80s was to promote diversity between collections and therefore depth in

the national collection, the outcome of current trends is to promote homogeneity between collections and a reduction in the depth of the national collection. Indeed in a remarkably short time we have moved from a situation where complementarity between research collections was considered to be an obvious good, to a point where university libraries operating in consortia will consciously decide to have duplicate collections. Or to put it another way, the focus of cooperative collecting has shifted from issues of ownership revolving around little used material, to issues of shared access to collections of core material.

It is not suggested that those involved in these decisions are insensitive to their consequences. Their key obligations, however, are obviously determined by the accountability to their own universities and users rather than any sense of *noblesse oblige* with regard to the nation's library using community. The universities and their libraries occupy an unenviable position; belonging to a culture which has long championed and still supports collaboration, but which is increasingly engaging in competition for funds, resources and students. Universities have now joined the battle for the competitive advantage, and information services and collections have become a weapon in that battle.

While services are seen as increasingly important, university libraries have also remained dependent on collection size and access to particular resources as indicators of quality. For although it has long been acknowledged that the size of a collection does not necessarily determine the value of a library service, there has nonetheless remained an ongoing reference to collection size as being an indicator of excellence. Perhaps, however, libraries are finally entering an era when collection size will be a genuinely less important measure. In particular, the prospect of national site licensing agreements, for academic and research libraries initially but with the possibility of being extended to school, public or classes of special libraries, will begin to reduce the size-based distinctions between collections. The 'big' may need to come to terms with an erosion of their advantage over the 'small', not only through inter library loan or document delivery, but also through collaborative collecting which results in the duplication of content.

Current activity

All this is not to suggest that there hasn't continued to be a considerable amount of activity which is designed to promote cooperative collecting agendas, sometimes on a national scale, and to which the National Library and CAUL are either leaders or contributors. One can find evidence of this in projects such as LIDDAS, Pandora and the JANUS proposal, services such as the Australian Libraries Gateway, and the work of groups such as the Australian Library Collections Taskforce, the National Scholarly Communications Forum, the National Resource Sharing Working Group, the CAUL Electronic Information Resources Committee, and the Coalition for Innovation in Scholarly Communication.

From the work of these groups, each of which deals with issues related to the nation's incapacity to provide for its own information needs, has emerged the concept that currently comes closest to emulating the general aims and goals of the DNC, that of the national library and information infrastructure. The debates around this notion of a national library and information infrastructure are broader in scope than the DNC – or if you prefer, less focussed as to their purpose – but this has more to do with the increasingly bewildering array of issues that require attention rather than any fundamental shift in purpose. But if the activities of these various bodies indicate a continued willingness to explore cooperative ventures when it comes to resources and collections, they also point to the ongoing fragmentation of these

efforts. For while these groups operate in full knowledge of each other's activities, and in some cases with shared membership, they currently function without an overarching administrative or policy structure and, since the diminution of the importance of the DNC, in the absence of a unifying guiding principle.

The ideal framework in which this task of building a national library and information infrastructure should be tackled is a National Information Policy. Completing such a policy is important if Australia is to achieve a coordinated approach to the challenging task of not only providing high quality library and information support for the nation's research community, but in order for the government, business, industry, and education sectors and individuals to derive full benefit from the advances in information delivery and storage. Completing a national information policy will be a lengthy and difficult task, and require the participation from a wide range of representative groups. Librarians, however, are well placed to play a leading role in the development of such a policy, given the profession's long standing engagement with the issues and their previous advocacy of such an outcome.

There also remains, however, the separate and more immediate task of setting a policy framework for library national collecting activity.

One might reasonably ask, why do we need a national policy or guidelines or leadership with regard to the development of the national collection? After all, one of the reasons why the DNC was able to be negotiated originally, and perhaps why it also began to diminish in the collective consciousness of the Australian library community, was the belief that Australia had such a thing anyway. That is, the existence of a distributed and cooperative network of libraries, supported by a high degree of coverage by accessible bibliographic records and an established inter library loan network, basically fulfils the requirements of a 'national collection'. If that is the case, then why attempt to impose some form of management upon a system that may already be working sufficiently well?

It was suggested previously that the major *reasons* why the concept of a national collecting policy was considered necessary are still with us, and it is also suggested that the principal *argument* which supported the formalisation of the concept also remains valid. That is, the argument which claims that the Australian library network and its community of users will receive long-term benefits from a planning process aimed at 'minimizing unnecessary duplication of acquisition, retention and preservation and maximizing the availability of different titles in the country'.⁶ Eric Wainwright used those words a decade ago, and they seem to be as true today. The information environment in which Australian libraries operate has changed substantially, and the national collecting agenda and related activities must change accordingly, but that does not invalidate the concept of building a collection which, in so far as possible, is developed as a coherent whole.

A way forward?

All of which leads to the title of this paper, 'Slouching towards Calvary'. It is derived from W. B. Yeats' poem, 'The Second Coming', in which he addresses the state of Christianity as the end of the millennium approaches, predicting in effect that its 2000 year period of dominance is coming to an end. Yeats wonders what will take its place, and asks 'what rough beast/ its hour come round at last/ slouches towards Bethlehem to be born'. It is clear that the concept of the national collection has also been under threat as we reached the final years of the millennium, that it has been slowly slouching off, not towards its Bethlehem but towards

its Calvary. Nobody yet has found the need to haul it up on the cross and drive in the nails, but it seems at times to be casting around in search of a final resting place and a decent burial.

The reason this image might serve as a metaphor for the situation of national collecting in Australia, is that the Calvary story is not about death, so much as rebirth and transformation. The DNC may be all but dead, but in its place can be constructed a new framework for national collecting activity, one which takes account of the lessons learnt from the perceived failure of the DNC, and makes allowances for the political, technological and practical realities of the new millennium.

What such a revamped national collecting policy will retain from the DNC is a belief that all libraries potentially have a part to play in building the national collection. The interests of scholars and researchers may be paramount when determining priorities, but they are by no means exclusive. The needs of all Australian library users will be served by sensible and well planned collaborative collecting policies and practices, and all library sectors have a part to play in their development and implementation.

The national collecting policy will also be similar to the DNC in that it will be underpinned by action in the five areas identified by ACLIS in 1991: collecting, bibliographical control, preservation, access, and national coordination. For three of these - bibliographical control (now often referred to as resource identification), preservation, and access - important issues remain, but they are for the most part identified and can be dealt with by the ongoing implementation of sound collection management practice – albeit on a national scale. This leaves collecting and national coordination, as areas where changes or conceptual shifts are required.

The collecting activities of the DNC as originally conceived were to take place in a framework provided by the Conspectus database. This database was never sufficiently complete in order to serve this function. Some of the residual data now resides in a more user-friendly form on the Australian Libraries Gateway (ALG), but it clearly remains inadequate to the intended task. Although the ALG may continue to develop, it seems apparent that national collecting activity will never be grounded, as was hoped, in the detailed knowledge of the state of other collections and their future collecting priorities.

The national coordination activities were intended to ensure that designated libraries received resources in order to develop as centres of subject excellence in the national interest. Very little of significance was achieved in this regard, and more recently we have seen the abandonment of attempts to support the similar JANUS proposal. While the concept remains worthy of support, the short-term failure to achieve these designated subject centres should not prevent the development of a national collecting agenda. The national collection does and will exist without them, and the challenge therefore remains to ensure that as far as possible that the desired level of excellence is distributed across the Australian library network rather than focussed in individual collections.

The subject of national coordination inevitably raises the issue of who will have responsibility. As indicated earlier, it may have been a flaw in the original DNC that the leadership and management role was too narrowly focussed in the National Library. An attempt to revamp the national collecting agenda would be better served by operating under a broadly based cross-sectoral body. Obviously there are many players in the business of higher education and research with an interest in the content of Australian library collections. Colin

Steele recently identified as ‘significant players in the Australian information content arena’, ‘the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), the Australian Vice-Chancellor’s Committee (AVCC), Standing Committee on Information Policy, (SCIP) Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), Department of Industry, Science and Resources (DISR), Australian Research Council (ARC), Education Network Australia (EDNA), Higher Education Information Group (HEIG,) the National Library, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)’.⁷

While members of all of the non-library based groups identified by Steele could be usefully coopted or consulted, it is important that initially the leadership and membership of a coordinating body for a national collecting policy be drawn from within the library community. If a shift is to be achieved from an exclusively research focus for the national library and information infrastructure, to a model aimed at meeting the needs of the broader community, then this can only be achieved by convening a body which brings together the library-based sectoral interests. Pre-armed with their experience of the DNC, librarians are uniquely placed to understand the issues involved in developing a national collection, including the implications of the alternative models which exist for information collection and delivery, and the complex content requirements of their diverse user groups. The National Library would remain the obvious centre for coordination and support for such a body.

It is not intended that such a body would impose a form of ‘top down’ management of the national collection, and nor would it impinge upon the activities of other bodies currently operating within the National Library, CAUL or other library groupings. Rather it would play a consultative, coordinating and advisory role, overseeing the development of content related priorities and supporting the reaching of goals related to those priorities. It would also have the following functions:

- the redefinition of the national collection in a manner that takes account of the digital collecting environment. It will be a definition that acknowledges that while library collections have an inevitably digital future, they will also remain intractably physical for the foreseeable future. It is also likely to be a definition which acknowledges that the development of a comprehensive trans-disciplinary national collection is not achievable.
- developing a set of national priorities related to the content of the nation’s library collections, the pursuit of which can be made through grants or some form of top-sliced funding.
- promoting and enabling the development of infrastructure needed for collaborative collecting action between libraries and between library sectors,
- monitoring developments within other library-based bodies with subordinate or overlapping interests, and identifying areas of unnecessary duplication of effort,
- building partnerships with other relevant groups to promote the interests of Australian library collections,
- representing Australian libraries in negotiations with content generators and suppliers on the future modes of information delivery and storage.

It would be unreasonable to expect that such a body could completely eliminate the tensions between national and institutional priorities which damaged the DNC. It would, however, be in a position to examine and promote the ways in which the digital collecting environment has permanently altered not only the relationship between libraries and their collections, but also between the collections of different libraries and therefore the emerging opportunities which exist for collaborative collecting. The work on the national library and information infrastructure will continue apace and independently, but it will be assisted by corresponding work on issues related to ensuring the best content outcome for Australian library collections, irrespective of format.

Conclusion

The challenges facing any body charged with overseeing a national collecting agenda are immense. Not only because the issues at hand are inherently complex, but also because it is clear that nobody can produce what is essential in order to make sense of them; that is, an accurate prediction of the information landscape 5 or 10 years hence. Trying to predict that future involves grappling with a bewildering array of technological, political, economic and social factors which will influence the manner in which libraries can gather, hold and transfer information, and therefore the way in which they will choose to act collaboratively in building collections. The onus, however, remains on the Australian library community to be involved in planning to manage these various influences in such a way that they will produce the most desirable outcomes for users of our collections.

And the benefits for library users are potentially enormous. As Joseph Branin concluded, 'The elusive but ultimate goal of cooperative collection development to coordinate the collection of the entire record of scholarship may have a new lease of life in the digital information system'.⁸ To work toward this, however, will require careful management at a national level, in order to ensure that the Australian national collection is planned, appropriate, equitable, and content rich.

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- ¹ A Byrne 'After the DNC: establishing a sustainable information environment for research and scholarship in Australia', 1997, <http://www.anu.edu.au/caul/nscf/byrne.htm> (accessed Nov 2000)
- ² A Crook 'The Distributed National Collection: an overview' *Australian Library Journal*, vol 42 no1 1993 pp3-8.
- ³ C Rusbridge 'Dealing with diversity: hybrid libraries and the Distributed National Electronic Resource', *Books and Bytes: Technologies for the Hybrid Library, Victorian Association of Library Automation, 10th Biennial Conference, Proceedings*, Melbourne VALA 2000 pp1-17
- ⁴ National Library of Australia 'Towards Federation 2001: Linking Australians and their Heritage: Progress Reports 1994-1996', <http://www.nla.gov.au/niac/meetings/pr9496.html> (accessed Nov 2000)
- ⁵ CAUL 'Strategic Plan 1999-2005' <http://www.caul.edu.au/caul-doc/strpln99final.html> (accessed Nov 2000)
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- ⁷ C Steele 'Library and information infrastructure: international strategic initiatives: a discussion paper prepared for the Coalition for Innovation in Scholarly Communication' <http://www.caul.edu.au/cisc/proj4final.doc> (accessed Nov 2000)
- ⁸ J Branin, F Groen and S Thorin 'The changing nature of collection management in research libraries', 1999, <http://www.arl.org/collect/changing.html> (accessed Nov 2000)