Data, the Creation of History and its Impact on Real Lives

Christine Kenneally
14th International Digital Curation Conference
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History and Real Lives

- How does history shape us?
- How do we know what we know?

HOW WHAT WE KNOW SHAPES WHO WE THINK WE ARE

A case where even today there is an devastating absence of personal information
Plight of orphans seeking information from the government

2012 International Congress on Archives (Brisbane)

“The Forgotten Ones”
*The Monthly*, August 2012

“We Saw Nuns Kill Children: The Ghosts of St. Joseph’s Catholic Orphanage”
*Buzzfeed News*, August 2018
Case study: US, Australia

Commonalities and Differences

- Data curators
- Powerful individuals
- Justice (transitional, legal)
- Journalism, scholarship
The critical significance of data curation in a democracy

1. The very great importance of truth to individuals

2. Institutions, even in open, democratic societies, can destroy and rewrite important truths

3. Data curators are frontline guardians to the bedrock of society
The world of orphanages

- Australia, New Zealand, England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, US
- 19th century, religious, state run
- Numbers are hard to quantify
  - Australia: ½ million children in over 2,000 institutions
  - US: Over 5 million children in over 3,000 institutions
  - Numbers peaked in the 1930’s, and declined from the 1960’s

- By the 1980’s few remained
The world of orphanages

• Significant economic and social entities
• Used as flagship institutions for charity drives and fund raising, bequests
• Recipients of governmental funding
• A source of unpaid labor
• A source of victims for predators
This world virtually disappeared

- Effectively replaced by foster care, other

**HOW?**

*How does an entire system shaping millions of lives disappear from history?*

**WHY?**
HOW: Forces against preservation of history

• Children are the victims
  • Lack resources to validate experience
  • Negative experience with orphanage creates distrust in other institutions
  • Disbelief in own experience
  • Disbelief by adults
• Abuse: traumatizing, stigmatizing, physically damaging, and memory impairing
• Withholding of information by institutions
Other forces against the preservation of history

• Staff, public reactions
• Creation of records
• Storage and preservation of records
• Withholding of records
Types of care-leaver records

- Birth records
- Care-leavers’ case/other files (correspondence, social worker reports, other documentation)
- School reports
- Medical records
- Photographs (individual, family, group)
- Accurate historical accounts about the institutions themselves
1990’s: Waking up, two different paths

- Individuals start to act
- Police interest
- People start to ask for their own records
- Activist groups form
- Beginnings of scholarship, journalism
- Beginnings of legal action

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US story

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Joey Barquin

Little response, highly redacted

Relatively uncritical, limited in scope, news reporting

Civil, criminal, statute of limitations
Australian story

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Leonie Sheedy, Frank Golding

CLAN

Relatively uncritical, limited in scope, news reporting, “Orphans of the Empire”

Civil, criminal, statute of limitations, state and federal inquiries
Find and Connect

“...a national web resource...”
“...the largest non-military public history project in Australia”
“...a major experiment in writing history in the digital domain”
“...living and responsive.”

Shurlee Swain

Historian, Emeritus Professor at Australian Catholic University

Find and Connect

“... a completely novel information provider, evidence-base, and story repository.”

Gavan McCarthy

Associate Professor, Director eScholarship Research Centre,
University of Melbourne
Find and Connect

“CLAN was the first Find & Connect.”

Leonie Sheedy

Co-founder and Executive Officer of Care Leavers Australasia Network CLAN, OAM, St. Catherine's Orphanage, Geelong 1957-1971
Find and Connect

“In essence, we want to know why what happened to us as children happened. The archived records represent a warehouse of hope where we will find answers to these questions that have nagged away at us, all the years of our adulthood.”

Frank Golding

Author, Historian, OAM, Ballarat Orphanage 1943-1953
Find and Connect

“The Find & Connect web resource is dynamic, highly curated, challenging and rewarding; and grapples with fundamental questions about knowledge and information. The Find & Connect web resource is just one element within larger networks and conversations taking place in Australia and internationally.”

Kirsten Wright
Program Manager, Find & Connect web resource, eScholarship Research Centre
Find and Connect

• Responsivity
• Evolution
  • Needs
  • Processes
What to Expect when Accessing Records about You

Download a printable version of What to Expect when Accessing Records about You (1.2 MB PDF)

- Starting the journey
- What to expect when accessing records
- How will I feel when I look at my file?
- Getting help to find records about you
- Past attitudes to recordkeeping
- What if there is no file about me?
- Other important records
- The Law and access to records about me and others

Starting the journey
Final report

The Royal Commission's final report has been released.

Read the report

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Fast facts

42,041
Calls handled

25,964
Letters & emails received

8,013
Private sessions held

2,575
Referrals to authorities (including police)
How does it feel to receive your records?
It was a late summer afternoon, Sally Dale recalled, when the boy was thrown through the fourth-floor window.

“He kind of hit, and—” she placed both hands palm-down before her. Her right hand slapped down on the left, rebounded up a little, then landed again.