



Scripturient

Passing the baton

“ Throughout the column’s history, I’ve tried to give the context and the human side to diverse instances and experiences of knowledge and information being generated and put to use.

T HIS edition of *Scripturient* marks the handover from Matt Finch, who has written the column for five years, to Barbara

Lemon, Director of Curatorial and Collection Research for Commissioned Collections at the National Library of Australia. Barbara and Matt recently got together for a chat, looking forward, looking back.

Matt – You’ve been a historian, a radio producer, an academic; you’ve written for newspapers and magazines, worked in the cultural institutions of many countries... Looking back, do you see a common thread to your various roles? Do you see where that thread got started? And how it led you to where you are today?

Barbara – I think the common thread is a personal conviction about the enduring power of discovering, preserving and telling human stories. Perhaps it started with an interview recorded on cassette with a 94-year-old ex-teacher in a country town one summer, a born storyteller who found whimsy and wry humour in a hard life. Or with the discovery of a fragile letter found in the pocket of a convict boy murdered in Melbourne in 1848, from his brother. As a young person I could see the capacity of these stories of ‘ordinary’ people to evoke human empathy and to shed light on larger historical events and human themes. That drive to make historical materials accessible and digestible has underpinned my work.

Of course human stories come in all sorts of formats and data packages for libraries, archives and repositories to manage. In the last five years writing this column, what stands out as a particularly human-centred data story for you?

Matt – That’s like asking me to choose my favourite child! I knew my successor would be brilliant... but a brilliant *monster*!?

Throughout the column’s history, I’ve tried to give the context and the human side to diverse instances and experiences

of knowledge and information being generated and put to use.

I guess when I think of Karen Levy, heavily pregnant, visiting truck stops as part of an ethnography of haulage regulation and productivity management, that was a standout - as much for revealing the secret world of the trucker’s cab as her own heroic efforts. I remember *Scripturient*’s great editor Rob Green saying “who knew electronic tachographs would be the gateway to a world of modern day cowboys”. Karen’s book *Data Driven* is a compelling account with relevance for everyone who experiences workplace surveillance.

And I have to shout out to the guest column by Sanchita Balachandran, who now heads museum conservation for the Smithsonian! She told the story of meeting her late maternal grandfather for the first time among the collections of a colonial archive.

You’ve worked in so many different cultural and information institutions around the world, what do you see as the similarities and differences, the pleasures, pressures, privileges, and perils of the information professional’s workplace?

Barbara – It was mean of me, wasn’t it? But I love the way the imagery and humanness of a story is what makes it stick in our minds.

Thinking back across those different workplaces, the common pleasure has always been proximity to vast cultural collections in all formats as sources of wonder and revelation, sometimes of beauty and horror too. The pleasure comes with the responsibility of custodianship and information management. The privilege is being in a position to connect other people to those collections and bearing witness to their responses and interpretations. The pressures can come from a mismatch between public expectations and financial realities, and sometimes from political survival – the need to continually advocate for essential but essentially invisible services to be



Matt Finch (@drmattfinch) is a writer and consultant who specialises in strategy, foresight, and innovation work with institutions worldwide. See more at www.mechanicaldolphin.com



Barbara Lemon is a curator, historian and library professional who specialises in oral history and digital collections for national libraries. See more at www.lemonbell.press

adequately supported. The perils lie partly in the perfectionist tendencies so widely shared in the profession, and in the fact that every technical solution we find to an information management problem is by nature temporary.

Have I just used up our word count? Blimey.

Thank you, Matt (I think) for leaving me with such very big shoes to fill. I look forward to sharing some data stories from Australasia and further afield.

***Scripturient* continues in the new year with Barbara at the helm while Matt retreats Gollum-like to his cave in the mountains. You may still see him emerge into the light from time to time in the pages of *Information Professional*, and he can also be found at mechanicaldolphin.com. IP**