

Food for Thought

Digitisation of Archives

By Beate Matthies

One year ago, on 4 May, 2017, *Archives New Zealand* published a guide on the digitisation on historical material which was followed up in October 2017 with a document on the *Destruction of source information after digitisation* – to be reviewed in 2020.



What does this mean for us?

Museums enable us to walk in the steps of those who have gone before us. The moment we enter the museum we are made aware of their lives in the past. We connect in a very special way: the past allows us to better understand the present and to prepare for the future.

Museums often started with one collector. One person who collected items of personal interest or items connected to a certain topic or area. But who



Pacific Lifeways exhibit at Auckland War Memorial Museum



can afford collecting items today? Space is expensive and the new apartments are getting smaller, ...

The digitisation seems to be a great solution. Items of interest are scanned or photographed and then stored on the computer, another electronic device – or even in the ‘cloud’. Museums and archives have been digitising historical material for many years – but what happens to the records once they are electronically archived? Do we still need the originals?

In the late 1970s the first suggestions were made that all historical materials should be digitised and a decision made whether to destroy or keep the original paper record. This is when the term “intrinsic value”¹ was forged – a term which defined historical material that should be kept in their original form in addition to the copies.

Space in Auckland is expensive. Historically important documents are electronically preserved. Why bother keeping the originals today?

Since the late 1970s the digital world has changed significantly. What might have sounded great then, proved to be unreliable for the future. A constant development of high performance devices and storage mediums has challenged the methods of archiving materials. *Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga Archives New Zealand* and *Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa National Library of New Zealand* have set up a *Digital Preservation Strategy*² in which they outline their strategy to “preserve and manage digital content to ensure that it can be accessed now and into the future”.

The digitisation seems to be a huge topic and concern for archives and libraries. One of the goals is that this process is to be cost-effective, but at the same time requires specialist skills to decide on all the right meta data and then to carry out the technical part of the digitising.

However, space is expensive, storage is expensive, maintaining museums is expensive. Will we still have museums and archives in the future? Will we

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1. www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/archives-resources/archival-material-intrinsic-value.html
 2. archives.govt.nz/advice/government-digital-archive-programme/digital-preservation-strategy/digital-preservation-strat

“As kaitiaki (guardians), responsible for caring for more than 4.5 million treasures, we hold the ‘DNA’ of Auckland. In recent years, we have worked with communities to better understand our taonga and have doubled our investment in their care.”



Auckland War Memorial Museum Five-year Strategic Plan
(www.aucklandmuseum.com/your-museum/about/five-year-plan)

still need them? If the archives and libraries succeed in finding the perfect way to electronically store historical materials long term, why would there be a need for retaining original material?

There are a few issues of concern for me:

1 Perception of Reality

If future generations know historical material only as digital data – how will they be able to differentiate between virtual and real items?

2 Protection from Manipulation

How can we be sure that the digitised material hasn't been manipulated or that an important characteristic of the historical material was not left out (what is important today might differ to what will be important in the future)?

3 Change of Perception

Characteristics of an item that seem irrelevant for the current generation might be important for future generations. How would we know what future generations are looking for? Maybe there will be a shift from a mainly visual focus to a focus based on hearing, smell, or taste?

4 Protection of Privacy

The use of historical material in a local museum might be fine for a person, but once it is digitised, there have to be

good safeguards in place to protect the privacy of anybody concerned.

5 Original vs Copy

Why do people still like building memorials on places that are connected to a famous person and turn that home into a museum? What makes some people pay a fortune for a guitar or a piece of clothing that used to belong to a famous person?

Also – why do people pay to go to a concert or a rugby match if they could just watch it on TV (and even from close up)? There must be something about the ‘atmosphere’, the admiration for the performers or the feeling of connectedness to a person or a group. In the same way, the original object can connect us in a different way to the past than the best digitisation could ever do.

Auckland Museum is a fascinating place. Some of the historical material is so recent that one might ask: “Does this really belong into a museum? I used to have this or that not too long ago ...”.

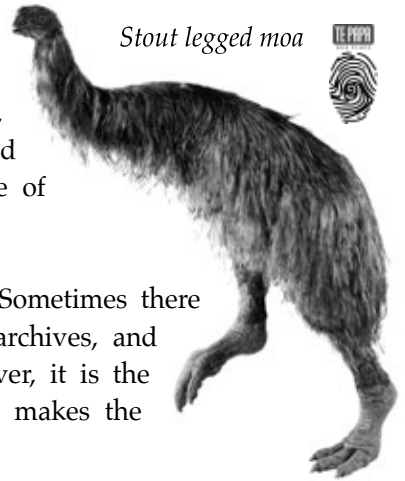
Then, there are some items from the times of your parents or grandparents involving many immigration stories. Then, further back in time, finding



Photography tent studio at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery library

information on the first people of the land, the Maori and how they lived. There are re-constructed wharenui, waka, tools, and many more items – and finally flora and fauna that was there before the first people of the land arrived.

Stout legged moa



Archives go hand in hand with museums. Sometimes there are fragile items of special interest in the archives, and a copy is displayed in the museum. However, it is the knowledge that the original still exists that makes the item in the museum even more interesting.

Certainly, the classification of items with intrinsic value protect some important historical objects. However, according to the *National Archives*, one of the reasons for preserving material is that the material is dated from before 1946. The reason for it is that “Prior to 1946 sources of information are limited and thus have inherent archival value.”³

What will future generations say about this decision? Since 1946, New Zealand and the make-up of its population has changed more than in the 40 years before that year. In the 1940s an average New Zealander would have written more letters by hand than today.

New Zealand has a relatively short history of its people. We are all making history. Every one of us, every moment. Some of this history will be forgotten, others will have impact for the future.

So far, the museums and archives have been a safe place to donate personal precious objects from the past in order to share them with many people. In the future, we might think twice if we want to donate an object or rather just loan it. If it is not considered worthy enough for the archive to keep, it is likely to be digitised and destroyed.

3. records.archives.govt.nz/assets/Guidance-new-standard/17-G13-Destruction-of-source-information-after-digitisation.pdf