

YOUR STORY, Our History

Established under the *Archives Act 1983* as an executive agency of the Commonwealth Government, the National Archives of Australia is keeping the country's memories alive through the preservation of government primary information sources.

Images by Irene Dowdy

The National Archives of Australia provides a sanctuary for the nation's documents, evidence, memories, and records so that Australia's history can be reinterpreted, rewritten, and reworked as time goes on. David Fricker is Director General of the organisation and believes history is never finally written or safe, making the role of the National Archives all the more important.

"Every generation looks at its past through its own lens and through its own contemporary set of values, beliefs, and experience," he says. "I like the quotation you hear quite often—'All history is fiction'—because history needs to be constantly rewritten. The way it is rewritten is through archives. The National Archives has the primary sources and the evidence from which new discoveries are made and from which an evolving history is developed.

"That is why our motto at the Archives is 'Your story, our history', and it is up to you to find your own particular story by researching these primary sources, records, and evidence. Through this process, we continue to evolve the sense of our own history. I don't think history should ever be considered safe. Every generation has the obligation to rewrite history, as far as I am concerned."

David joined the Archives at the start of 2012 and comes from a background of information, strategic and change management within the government sector. His previous role was with the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), where he drove innovation and reform during a significant period of growth and change. Prior to that, he ran his own consultancy company, Business Synetics. His past experience has taught him many things, including that when you are in a leadership position

you need to know exactly what it is you stand for and define a clear set of goals.

"You have to be consistent about those goals and have them in mind every day, in every part of the work that you do," he says. "Also, you have really got to be ready to sacrifice the sacred cow. So much progress is impeded by people hanging onto old ideas that have outlived their usefulness. Technical obsolescence is a good thing; it's inevitable and demonstrates progress and innovation. But when we talk about an idea becoming obsolete, that's a different thing. When you have an idea that's holding you back, it usually means it wasn't such a good idea in the first place."

The Archives' role is to be the custodian of the Commonwealth Government's memory and to make it accessible to the broader community. Its core business is not to simply store records, although it

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does hold vast amounts of information, but to bring authentic, accurate, and intact records to the Australian public—and now, through the virtual environment, to a global audience.

“The Archives keeps a nation’s memory,” David says. “Everyone instinctively knows that if you lose your memory, then you lose everything. You lose all your knowledge, your social networks, your identity, and any ability to make decisions about the future. We need to be preserving our capability to look back to what happened in the past so that we can make sensible decisions about the future. The Archives is so important because the records we hold have significant information about individual and national identity.

“Individual people can come to us to research their family history—to understand who they are, where they came from, and to get a much better understanding of their own identity. Then, at a national level, we have this incredible collection of material that is the intellectual capital of the nation, enabling the development of new knowledge.”

The National Archives has a great level of educational value and is used regularly by a wide range of people. The organisation has aligned with the national school curriculum and has a ‘virtual reading room’ that provides resources to teachers and students. Other educational initiatives include providing information for the ABC’s Splash website, and creating a special online learning section for the World War I centenary on its *Discovering Anzacs* website.

Technology has been a huge enabler for the National Archives, and the current phenomenon of digital disruption has been vitally important to its operations. It is allowing David and his team to reinvent the processes and the organisational arrangements of the records. “We are going to complete an end-to-end review of the way that the Archives operates in the

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digital age, enabled by new and emerging technology,” he explains.

“That means that we are going all the way back up the value chain, looking at the way in which records are created to gain insights into the information culture within an organisation and how we can embed better processes and systems. We want systems to recognise data of enduring value, grab that data the instant it is created, wrap it up in a rich layer of metadata, and protect and preserve it so that it is useable and reuseable well into the future. Technology is enabling us to completely reimagine the way that the Archives works to transform the way that we deliver a rich set of authentic records to all Australians well into the future.

“We are also using technology to ensure that digital information outlives technical obsolescence, so that we have information that lives forever. Technology certainly does touch every corner of the organisation and is one of the most exciting aspects of working in the Archives at the moment.”

David says the organisation has a number of key relationships that are integral to its operations. The first is with the Commonwealth Government: “We are not a mega agency by any means, so we have to work with Commonwealth

departments and agencies cooperatively and collaboratively to develop information policies and better systems for the management of information.”

The second is with the general public: “That relationship is around how we are enabling better channels of access and what we are doing to allow the general public to connect much more easily with the collections held within the Archives.”

The third relationship is with the business community: “To grow our capability and to open up the collection, we need partnerships with businesses who can work with us to achieve our mutual goals.” Furthermore, the Archives reaches out overseas, connecting with other cultural institutions to bring benefits in terms of international relations and foreign policy.

David is extremely proud of what he and his staff at the Archives have achieved during his tenure so far. He is thrilled to have seen a cultural shift across the Commonwealth Government sector, and also the commencement of new infrastructure projects such as the repository and preservation facility currently being built in Canberra. “What we have seen coming to the fore is an understanding of information as a vitally important asset, just as

important as financial assets, human resource assets, knowledge, and so on,” David says.

“The digital transformation is being embraced. You can re-engineer processes, you can mobilise workforces, you can reimagine the business model, but none of that has lasting value unless the information assets underlying all of that are of a high quality and durability. That for me is something that has been very satisfying.”

On a more personal level, David was honoured to have been elected as president of the International Council on Archives, based in Paris. “I am quite proud of that because I think that is emblematic of the way that the National Archives of Australia is recognised as a leading institution in the global information management community. It is just one more reminder that Australia does actually occupy a significant position of leadership in

information management and policy around the world.”

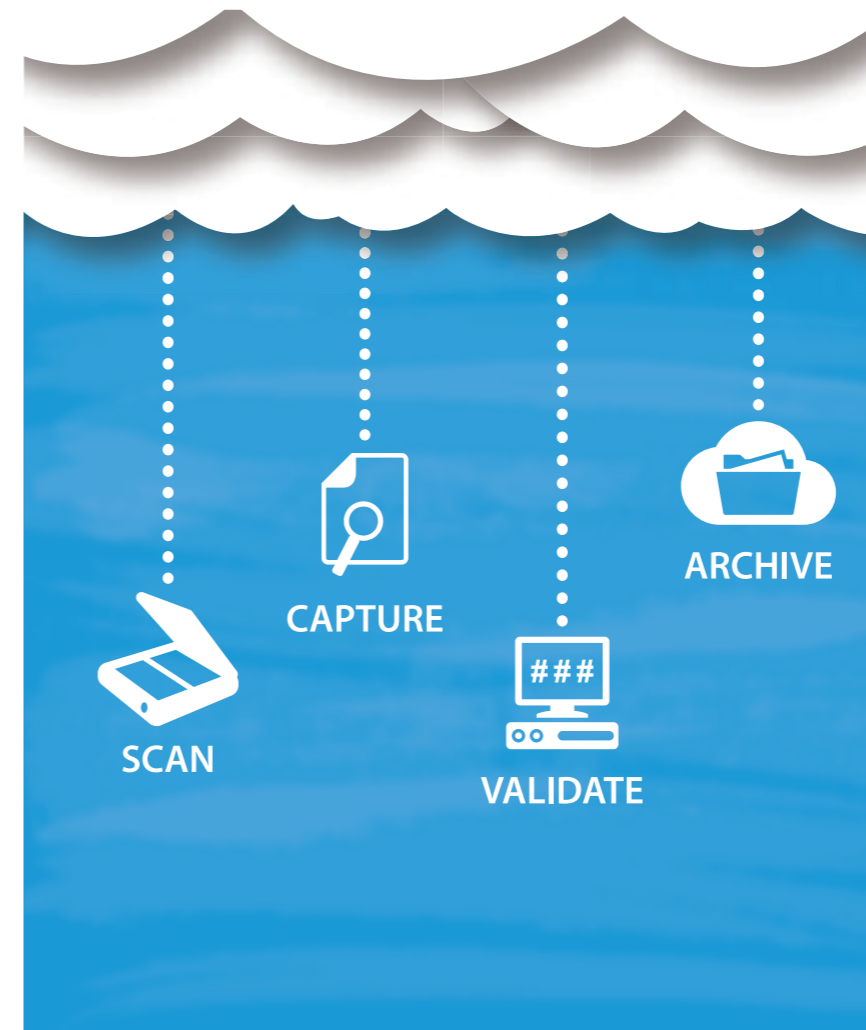
Looking forward, David believes the Archives will continue to play a crucial role in society, operating across the continuum of the information life cycle. It will be more than just the final resting place for information. “In the digital world, the Archives will be operating all the way back to the pre-creation stage of information to make sure that the information governance, policy, practices, and systems, as well as the values and behaviours of organisations, are right to create and capture authentic, valuable, and enduring information.

“A critical part of creating more value for the general community will be the mass digitisation of the records held within the Archives. In the future, I hope to see more and more of our collection digitised and discoverable online, enabling all Australians to fully recognise the potential of



Australia’s memory. We need to make sure that the information we store is protected, wrapped up in a rich layer of metadata, and preserved into a collection.

“I think that is the main change for us ahead. We will be operating across that complete continuum of the information life cycle to ensure the memory and evidence of the Commonwealth Government of Australia is preserved and made accessible for all future generations.” •



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