Mergers – Possibilities and Impact of Mergers in Australia and Overseas

Merging GLAM\(^1\)

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An OCLC report of 2008 distinguishes 5 modes in a collaboration continuum: contact, cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and finally convergence. One wonders if one should perhaps add competition, healthy competition as a condition for collaboration.

Collaboration continuum presented by Zorich, Waibel and Erway (2008)\(^2\)

Collaboration moves beyond contact, cooperation, and coordination. It often starts with the question: ‘What can we do together?’ It is a ‘process of shared creation’ of ‘something that wasn’t there before’. That ‘something’ is not just a new idea, but a transformation among the collaborating institutions. They may continue being independent (but sharing some services), or joined in a holding, like in New Zealand and in Singapore. Collaboration can, according to the OCLC report, mature to the level of infrastructure and lead to convergence - a real merger, as in Hobart, Leeuwarden, Ottawa and Montréal. Constructions which leave the converging institutions largely independent from each other but subject to a common executive resemble (as for example the national libraries and archives of New Zealand and Singapore) more a holding company than a merger. I will come back later on mergers.

Quite often, according to Joanna Sassoon, debates about GLAM convergence focus on what materials the institutions hold and what professionals do, rather than how they think. Before one

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\(^1\) GLAM = Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums. An expanded version of this paper with all references will be published in *Archifacts*, the journal of the Archives & Records Association of New Zealand.

can successfully converge practices, one has to strive at understanding what values underpin professionals’ thinking.

One way to discover these values is looking at the profession’s ethics. There are several issues in ethics relevant to all GLAM professionals, for example issues related to conflicts of interest, political intrusion, equality of patrons, integrity in acquiring artefacts, commercialism, etc. But in each of the GLAM sectors there are sector-specific ethical challenges. All professionals are engaged in the protection of privacy and of cultural rights, but librarians and archivists have an extra duty to protect the privacy of users, while archivists moreover have to protect the interests of the record subjects: prisoners, asylum seekers, adopted children, patients, and clients.

Another approach to professional values is proposed in Shannon Wellington’s recent PhD thesis at Victoria University Wellington: Building GLAMour: Converging practice between Gallery, Library, Archive and Museum entities in New Zealand Memory Institutions. It does not only contain a good literature review and a remarkable theoretical discussion, but also three case studies of Te Papa, New Zealand’s national integrated museum and art gallery in Wellington, Puke Ariki, a self-defined converged library, archive, museum and information centre in New Plymouth, and Te Ahu, a converged cultural heritage concept in Kaitaia, Northland, which includes the region’s museum, library and information centre, little theatre, archives and conference facilities.

From her cases Shannon Wellington identified eight core principles which in each GLAM domain carry varying levels of importance. She mapped these on a scale of 0 to 10.

\[\text{Shannon Wellington, Fig. 30 The GLAM Matrix.}^{3}\]

The matrix reflects the values as articulated by staff and in the documentation of the three institutions studied by Wellington. In other cases the matrix might show different values. I consider the matrix as a very valuable tool to identify the differences in core principles dividing professionals. Shannon argues that ‘maintaining the integrity of the individual GLAM paradigms whilst looking for opportunities to build integrative layers on top of core GLAM functions’ would be ‘a constructive approach to the development of future joined-up models of operation’.

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The matrix also indicates the areas where professionals could learn from and contribute to colleagues. Librarians may learn from archivists to appreciate preservation, and managing ‘abundance’ (as Michael Loebenstein said this morning), while archivists might demonstrate to their colleagues the value of historical evidence for accountability. Librarians and archivists could benefit from the experiences of their colleagues in galleries and museums in interpretation, education and entertainment. Several libraries and archives are in fact providing a museum experience, as the Canadian archivist Hugh Taylor proposed as early as 1995. A few years before, his colleague Ian Wilson - who was to become national archivist and in 2004 the first chief librarian and national archivist of Canada - had argued that there is ‘no reason why archives cannot emulate museums and provide structured, even entertaining, historical experiences for visitors’. Such an experience is offered, for example, by the Dutch National Archives in an information and education space ‘The Memory Palace’ where visitors can experience the power of documents and other artefacts from the past.

What, you may wonder, has a library or an archives to do with interpretation, education and entertainment? Our users, patrons, visitors are visiting our places and spaces seeking meaning — and thereby construction or reconstruction of identities. Communicating meanings transcends merely transmitting information. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill advocates the museum as communicator, and I believe that that would be equally valid for galleries, libraries and archives.

Do the differences between these ‘concept spaces’ make a difference for the meaning of the record, the book, the painting, the object? Information resources do not ‘have’ meanings, but different meanings are assigned to the same resource by different people at different times. ‘The’ conventional meaning of a given resource is a matter of intersubjective consensus. Meaning is something made, not found.

However, the way the artefact is mediated in GLAM concept spaces, constrains the meaning making in cognitive, affective and conative modes. Mediation involves definition, selection, organisation, interpretation, representation and presentation.

Let me give an example. Of Abel Tasman’s journal of 1642-1643 are two versions preserved: one in the National Archives of the Netherlands, another in the Mitchell Library in the State Library of New South Wales, bought in 1926 for £740 - in today’s money 64,500 Australian dollars. The catalogue entry for the Tasman journal in the State Library in Sydney is very detailed, providing much contextual information which may assist the reader in his or her use of the journal in any of its versions. On the website of the National Archives of the Netherlands, the journal’s description of one line merely gives the title and the dates of the journal, accompanied by a warning that the document is not available in the search room because it is exhibited, in a glass case in the exhibition area where the National Archives and their neighbour, the national library, exhibit their treasures. Here, the Tasman journal has been ‘musealiséd’ which means that the status of the object has changed through the change of context and the process of selection and display. The meagre description is according to Dutch archival standards. Normally, however, one would see the description embedded in the recordkeeping context, as part of a file, a series, and an archival fonds. Because the Tasman journal seems to be not one of the six originals that were sent from Batavia to Amsterdam in December 1643, it is considered by some archivists not to be part of the VOC archives - another example of the effect of mediation.

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5 http://onderwijs.gahetna.nl/het-geheugenpaleis
7 http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/archief/inventaris/inleiding/eadid/1.11.01.01/inventarisnr/121
The way it is presented on the website of the National Archives - in stark contrast with the extensive description by the State Library of NSW - reveals a weakness in the way archivists deal (or used to deal?) with their collections, often with a blind spot for what the user would want or would like to know. Archival methods (acquisition, description, and appraisal) traditionally focused on supply, rather than on users’ demands. Other professions also have their own blind spots. Librarians still focus on the published word, distinguishing between book and non-book materials. The curator in a museum is a story teller, not trusting the visitor’s ability to draw meaning from the exhibit without the curator’s conscious intervention. These differences in professional values have led to differences in cataloguing practices, metadata standards, resource discovery, and access procedures, as we have seen with the Tasman journal.

This should not prevent GLAM professionals to work towards reconciling and harmonising policies and practices. Users, visitors, clients, patrons will increasingly question GLAM’s differing professional identities and cultures, as Robert Martin has argued:

They may not understand—and come to question the value of—our differing professional identities and cultures.8

Harmonisation of practices was the basis of the merger of the national library and the national archives of Québec. Harmonisation, it was felt, guarantees respect for the specificities of the disciplines, in this case of library science and archival science. In Québec harmonisation was preferred over integration - the strategy used by the merged Library and Archives Canada (LAC), which basically meant the assimilation of disciplines: librarians would also be archivists and vice versa, or even creating a new discipline.

This has in Ottawa not led to better services to users, and it has estranged LAC from the library and archival communities. It is the wrong strategy. In a recent study of two Canadian institutions (not LAC) and three New Zealand institutions it was found that the success of convergence projects seems to require that one finds the right balance between respecting professional expertise and merging systems.9 Collaboration and convergence, according to Wendy Duff and her colleagues, can be hampered or even fail because of not adequately recognising and respecting the expertise of a particular discipline; of not sharing a common understanding of different work practices, processes and outputs; and of the difficulty of merging or reconciling variant standards.

I would like to add another factor contributing to the success of a merger. It strikes me that most, if not all, successful mergers between libraries and archives, sometimes with a museum too, have not happened at a national level, top down, but in places where they are embedded in a local or regional community with a strong sense of identification, self-understanding and commonality, like Friesland, Québec, and Tasmania.

Duff and her colleagues discuss the factors driving collaboration and convergence:

1. To serve users better
2. To support scholarly activity
3. To take advantage of technology developments
4. To achieve budgetary and administrative efficiencies
5. To adapt to an evolving understanding of digital surrogates as objects
6. To obtain a holistic view of collections.

It is clear that for GLAM institutions factor 3, modern information and communication technologies, offer ‘great opportunities for linking resources between these different types of collections, and may lead to exciting collaborations’.10 ‘Being digital’ and being digital in conjunction with partner-institutions and in a smart way clearly enables GLAM to serve users better, attract more users and to prosper in the battle of fittest. However, as a study of the virtual museum by the Canadian Heritage Information Network warns:

One needs to be careful, however, to not let the technology drive changes in missions for these various types of organizations; professionals need to consciously evaluate and adopt mission changes, rather than merely accept them because of mission-drift caused by technology.11

Being digital has enormous consequences for GLAM materials, GLAM users, GLAM professionals, and GLAM institutions, both at the front-end and in the back-office. At the front-end people approach GLAM as an extension of their personal and community memories embedded in mediascape: social media, mobility, connectivity, multimedia, e-business - these and more define the social and cultural ecology of which GLAM are a part. But the ecology has to be sustainable. I am referring to the challenges of enduring access to digital-born and digitised documents, books, artworks, etc. challenges all GLAM sectors. But be cautious in considering this common challenge as a driver for convergence. Let's not be blind to the differences between, for example, digital publications and electronic records, differences due to distinct processes that result in the creation of digital publications and electronic records. As Library and Archives of Canada has found out, convergence through combined digital asset management is possible, but only to some extent.

The challenges and opportunities of the digital are too important to be left to the ‘techies’. We need ‘digital savvy’ curators, librarians, archivists, museum and other information professionals who have been trained or retrained in digital curation. Tibbo and Lee propose a digital curation curriculum for GLAM professionals across a wide range of GLAM contexts that will teach skills that are necessary regardless of institutional context, but taking into account the particular ways in which the skills are applied in each of the GLAM domains.

Digital curation and curating analogue materials should be carried out taking into account the differences in core values and practices of GLAM professionals. These differences should be acknowledged, even celebrated, provided that the work towards reconciling and harmonising policies and practices is taken seriously. That is the duty GLAM professionals and GLAM institutions owe now and in the future to the other constituents: GLAM materials and GLAM users, visitors, clients, and patrons. Communicating to users the materials as repositories of meanings is the ultimate purpose of curation for a poetic GLAM that is:

a place of ‘dreams’, of re-enactment for both the user and the archivist (curator), who together always are engaged either passively or actively in the process of refiguration that is never ending.12

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11 Dietz et al, Virtual Museum.