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**Abstract:** A nation’s collective consciousness relies on the traces of memory collected by institutions such as libraries, archives and museums. Such institutions have a responsibility to preserve documents and objects that reflect individual and collective endeavors and that have had an impact on culture and society at national, regional and local levels. Institutions need to assess documents and objects against criteria that, in effect, ‘name’ these items as significant. Most institutions claim that this process is objective, failing to acknowledge that it is underpinned by ideological, political, economic, cultural and social influences. The position adopted in this paper is that the process of naming a document or object as significant will always reflect the directions and consciousness of a society’s dominant groups, and that this will shape interpretations and narratives of the past. Thus the voices of a community’s minority or special interest groups will be silenced. This paper suggests that neither the concept of significance nor the process of assessing significance are benign; both should be seen as areas of tension and contestation.
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BIO
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Abstract

A nation’s collective consciousness relies on the traces of memory collected by institutions such as libraries, archives and museums. Such institutions have a responsibility to preserve documents and objects that reflect individual and collective endeavors and that have had an impact on culture and society at national, regional and local levels. Institutions need to assess documents and objects against criteria that, in effect, ‘name’ these items as significant. Most institutions claim that this process is objective, failing to acknowledge that it is underpinned by ideological, political, economic, cultural and social influences. The position adopted in this paper is that the process of naming a document or object as significant will always reflect the directions and consciousness of a society’s dominant groups, and that this will shape interpretations and narratives of the past. Thus the voices of a community’s minority or special interest groups will be silenced. This paper suggests that neither the concept of significance nor the process of assessing significance are benign; both should be seen as areas of tension and contestation.
Introduction

As I was writing this paper, I read a review of a television documentary commemorating the fifth anniversary of 9/11. The documentary was about Richard Drew’s *Falling Man* series of photographs of a person falling to their death from the World Trade Center. These photographs became the subject of media self-censorship and debate in the US: ‘Several days after the photograph appeared, it vanished – there was a deeply held belief the deaths of the jumpers weren’t proper, indeed they were cowardly. The images that came to symbolize the day were helmeted heroic rescuers working in the rubble and the jumpers disappeared’ (Blundell, 2006). These images are representative of the significance debate. History is written by victors. It is the dominant paradigm and its culture and institutions that define what is to be remembered, and how it will be remembered.

Within collecting institutions, such as libraries, museums and archives, that seek to provide enduring access to the cultural memory, the concept of significance emphasizes importance and consequence to the community served by these institutions. Assigning significance creates an illusory ‘fiction’ of collective understanding, so that an item of documentary heritage, once designated significant, is deemed worthy of remembering. The consequence of assigning significance is understood within the institutions as helping to shape the future consciousness, interpretations and narratives of their communities. The act of assigning significance is a social action that is constituted through a symbolic need to
establish or maintain a social thread or connection, to preserve a footprint that is deemed important, and to ensure the continuity of a community’s memory. Piggott (2005, p. 311) describes memory as inherently ‘social’. He suggests that in the process of assigning significance we commit to memory an intentional rendering, interpretation and narrative that will have long-lasting implications. The reasons and consequences underpinning the assignation of significance should be carefully examined and considered by librarians. Their involvement in this process and their actions have an indirect impact on future interpretations and shared narratives of history. In this respect, the process of identifying material as significant has a symbolic function, creating knowledge about an object’s importance and about repositories of knowledge built and maintained by librarians, that help shape future cultural memory.

The UNESCO-sponsored Memory of the World Programme exemplifies this process. The Programme identifies those document records of human endeavor that are designated as significant and may be digitized so that they remain accessible to future generations. In discussing the current institutional trend of digitizing collections, Dalbello (2004, p. 267) recognizes the impact of this activity on the shaping and structure of cultural memory: ‘the shaping of cultural memory corresponds to the emergence of shared narratives from an array of possible historical interpretations. Loci of memory, key events, key texts or artefacts then become symbolic points of reference for group identities.’
However, as Pymm (2006, p. 65) notes, the process of determining an item’s significance and the impact of this process have received scant attention from the library profession. In libraries, determining and assigning significance proceeds as a largely uncontested practice. While the concept of selection is well documented, the associated concept of significance and its implications and consequences for both library collections and society remain unexplored and uncontested.

In this paper I explore the concept of significance as it relates to collecting institutions such as libraries and archives. I argue that, while the concept is not identified as problematic in the literature, it is highly problematic in practice. This is primarily because the process of identifying an item as significant is a subjectively constituted practice that constructs a social reality and produces a collective consciousness. It is underpinned by the narratives, directions and values of dominant groups within a society, who influence institutional agency and practice in the designation of significance. Thus the construct of significance cannot guard against ‘collective amnesia’, because the voices of a community’s marginalized groups or disenfranchised interests, with different or contested stories to tell and, consequently, different memories to preserve, are silenced.

Three inter-related themes are used to explore the implications and consequences of significance:

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- assigning significance as a political act;
- significance as a social construct; and,
- significance as a contestable practice.

The aims of the paper are to problematize the discursive practices of significance assessment by challenging aspects of the concept, and to pose questions to stimulate the exploration and consideration of significance in library contexts. Although the paper draws on Australian activities and approaches to identifying and describing items as significant, the questions posed will resonate for memory institutions worldwide.

The Politics of Memory: Contesting Concepts of ‘Institutional’ Significance

Designating items of documentary heritage as significant is a political act. It has implications for the preservation of knowledge and the shaping of cultural memory. Items are selected as significant because they are deemed to represent intellectual endeavor, because they may be unique, and because they reflect or report a particular activity at a particular point in time. Within this process a secondary process of knowledge creation and mediation occurs. Through this secondary process knowledge is created about an item’s importance in relation to its ability to contribute to and enrich the fabric of society. This knowledge is then used to mediate and advocate the worthiness of the documents for preservation purposes. The implications of this secondary
process of knowledge creation remain largely unexplored in the library literature.

This secondary process not only determines an item's importance to the collective memory of society, but also creates a unitary fiction about what is valued and worth attending to through the costly processes of long-term preservation. This in turn can be used to suppress contestation of the value of memory by marginalized groups. The production and retention of knowledge through documentation and preservation of documentary heritage that is determined as significant constitutes, therefore, the exercise of power over others. Alvesson (2002, p. 56), in discussing the connection between power and knowledge, suggests that ‘knowledge orders and structures the world; the world is formed by the knowledge institutionalized within it’. This secondary knowledge creation aims to foster and maintain overarching narratives (the narrative of discourse), which, in turn, work towards rendering, securing and maintaining the dominant group’s position within society (Alvesson, 2002; Foucault, 1977, 1980). The discursive representations produced and maintained through discursively-constituted practices are sanctioned by the group and ultimately represent a particular interpretation of reality and construction of truth that regulate ‘what is said and written and passes for more or less orderly thought and exchange of ideas’ (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 2).
This exercise of power can have a negative and long-lasting influence on future generations and the resilience of collective memory. Zhang and Schwartz (1997) provide the drafting of Yugoslavian libraries during the Milosevic regime as an illustration of attempts to alter collective memory through discursively sanctioned practices. These libraries were commandeered to validate ethnocentric myths that perpetuated an inflammatory collective memory by emphasizing selected historical events and by promoting social stereotypes as historical fact. Similarly, Knuth (2004) reports on the systematic destruction of Tibetan documentary heritage by the Chinese before and during the Cultural Revolution in an attempt to eradicate Buddhism and traditional cultural memory. Knuth uses this as an illustration of the application of discursive practices to acculturate an indigenous group into the discourses of an invasive and powerful culture.

Codified knowledge is viewed as ordering and structuring the world, and libraries, archives and other memory institutions play a critical role in ensuring the recognition, survival and preservation of documentary heritage in physical and, increasingly, in digital form (Cook, 2001). In this respect the discursive practices of memory institutions are critical in ensuring that knowledge is accessible to present and future generations. This places them in an often downplayed, yet powerful and influential, position as keepers of cultural truth, shapers of memory and guardians of sanctioned knowledge.
Concepts of power and knowledge affect any discussion about significance, because they underpin questions about the construction and contestation of truth and about whose knowledge is worth preserving for future generations. Alvesson (2002, p. 56) maintains that ‘power resides in the discursive formation itself – the combination of a set of linguistic distinctions, ways of reasoning and material practices that together organize social institutions and produce particular forms of subject’. The relationship between knowledge and power is a key element in critiquing the concept of significance, because it illustrates that dominant ideologies maintain their dominance by simultaneously embracing the notion of transcendent truth and defining the rules that determine truth (Fletcher, 1999, p. 23).

Therefore, the retention and shaping of collective memory and determinations of significance will be underpinned by notions of truth held by the powerful in society and by the decisions of the powerful about which truth, or which versions of truth, are valid and worthy of preserving for the long term. These decisions will be inherent in any criteria for selection for significance and in the availability of funding for the long-term retention of items that contribute to shaping the collective memory of that society.

Significance and Identity
The construct of significance is also central to understanding the way that discourse and discursive practices affect and influence the identification of items of significance by
collecting institutions. The decision to designate an item as significant legitimizes the item in accordance with societal subjectivities, which are then enacted through institutional agency. Alvesson (2002, p. 50) states that ‘Discourses produce subject positions - not that different from roles - that individuals are located in (locate themselves in). These subject positions then drive individuals’ perceptions, intentions and acts’.

In Western collecting institutions the designation of an item as significant reflects and reinforces power relations. It does this by facilitating the shaping of societal identity and memory, thus ensuring that the dominant voices, narratives and interpretations, constituted through documentary (physical and digital) statements, are preserved and, therefore, available to be incorporated into the collective consciousness which is the fabric of national or unitary identity. In his discussion of the evolution and function of libraries, Knuth (2003, p. 19) states that ‘as societies grow in complexity, they increasingly depend on systems of knowledge that serve to connect various types of behavior, apply lessons from the past to future enterprises, and organize the indispensable activities of modern living.’

Critiquing significance leads us to consider and problematize the concept by acknowledging the nature of truth and the possibility of contested truth. What becomes important in any analysis of significance is what is considered and interpreted by stakeholders (e.g. funding bodies, librarians, dominant
interest groups) as truth (and therefore significant), and what is not (and therefore dismissed or disenfranchized). This begs the questions: how are determinations of significance made? and, how representative of a community are the committees that make these determinations?

Contesting Memory

While librarians have been silent about the implications of significance and about how to determine significance, another group - archivists - have been actively reappraising their professional activities to focus more on social memory and the contestation of memory. Piggott (2005, p. 320) calls this 'remembering and forgetting'.

Examples drawn from archival studies literature illustrate the contested nature of social memory resulting from selection decisions. Piggott (2005) questions the nature of truth and interpretation and the impact of this activity on the retention of archival materials. He refers to the official enquiry into the National Library of Australian’s policies that was triggered by the exhibitions in the First Australians gallery where display of items relating to such events as the Bells Falls massacre of indigenous people in New South Wales contested the sanctioned interpretations of written history. Piggott writes ‘there is clearly a visible clash of two kinds of memory, two ways of knowing and remembering. The presence and interpretation of archival documents was and is crucial to that clash’ (Piggott, 2005, p. 312).
Acknowledging and Silencing Identity: the Australian Memory of the World Program

There is little evidence in the literature of librarianship that the concept of significance and the impact of its designation have received much critical attention or thought. Discussion of methods for determining significance in libraries has drawn heavily on practice in the archaeological and built heritage sectors. This is remarkable, given that libraries assert a mandate as keepers of collective memory. In one rare exception, Lyall (1993) explored significance in the context of the collecting and preservation responsibilities of the National Library of Australia. Her criterion for identifying an item as of national significance was that it ‘constitutes an authoritative significant record of Australia as a country of the people, events and influences which have affected it’ (Lyall, 1993, p. 71).

A reason for this apparent lack of interest in significance as a concept may be found in the dominant neoliberal reality that underpins the economics of preservation activities in the libraries and other collecting communities. Decision-makers tend to operate in management contexts with limited budgetary resources and finite storage space. Consequently, what is determined to be significant in terms of the dominant paradigm reflects the reality of these constraints and, therefore, constructs history in a way that is influenced by and maintains the dominant identity and advantage of particular groups. Decision-makers do not have the resources to preserve everything. Therefore, decisions have to be made about what is
significant and, consequently, whose interests are to be acknowledged, what documented history is to be privileged, and whose history is to be marginalized or silenced.

The UNESCO Memory Of the World Programme was designed to ensure the preservation of endangered documentary heritage that was considered to be of importance to regions or groups and at risk of disappearing (Knuth, 2003). The objective of the Programme is to prevent ‘collective amnesia’ (Knuth, 2003, p. 295) by establishing a register that would be accessible worldwide. Established in 1992, the Programme recognizes the fragile nature of documentary heritage and the unstable nature of global affairs. It aims to ensure that access to significant documents, central to the fabric of a society, are preserved. The Programme’s guidelines encapsulate the intention: ‘The UNESCO Memory of the World Programme is aimed at safeguarding the world’s documentary heritage, democratizing access to it, and raising awareness of its significance and of the need to preserve it’ (Foster et al., 1995, p. 1).

Many countries have their own national version of this project. The Australian Memory of the World Program is split into tiers for national, regional and local significance. Items deemed of national significance must demonstrate ‘historic, aesthetic, spiritual, community or research significance’ (Australian Memory of the World Committee, 2005). They are judged against criteria which require evidence that they:
• are authentic - the authority, identity and provenance of the item must be established;
• are unique - recognized as iconic to a community;
• are irreplaceable - its loss would impact on collective societal memory;
• have an impact - over time and space;
• have influence - the influence may be positive or negative;
• are representative of type without direct equal; and,
• demonstrate comparative value - rarity, completeness, integrity relative to others of its kind.

In undertaking the ‘test’ for significance each item must be measured in terms of one or more of the following:
• time - the temporality should be established, the item must demonstrate significant cultural or societal change;
• place - location of creation, or location of event of phenomenon represented in document;
• people - social or cultural context reflected in the document;
• subject and theme - historical or intellectual developments; and,
• form and style - aesthetic, stylistic or linguistic values, document should be an exemplar of its type (Howell, 2002, p.6).

Items can be nominated for the national register; if deemed ‘nationally significant’, they can also be nominated by the CSU Research Output http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au
national committee for inclusion on the world register. To date the majority of items on the national register (http://www.amw.org.au/register/amw_reg06.htm) record Western accomplishments or benefactions to minorities (e.g. the Endeavour Journal of James Cook; the Mabo Case Manuscripts).

Applying a significance assessment methodology can, therefore, be viewed as a discursively constituted practice, influenced by the subjectivities of the assessors and of institutions which are, in turn, influenced by availability of funds and by the over-riding narratives of influential groups in their constituencies. In the act of nomination for the national register, the concept of significance imposes an overarching meaning upon a document or object (possibly extending or altering its internal meaning). This assigns unique qualities to an item and alludes to a notion of the document or object as having a unified meaning that is uncontested by the community.

Objective Significance? Whose Memories are Worth Remembering?

As the example above demonstrates, assigning significance is a reductionist process; that is, the document or object is reduced to meeting a set of criteria, established by the collecting or assigning organization. The irony of this position is that the development of criteria, while it is claimed to be an objective process, in fact underlies the subjective positions and political interests of those charged with determining significance and thus privileges some
memories over others. Cook (2001, p. 9) asserts that there is ‘nothing neutral, objective, or “natural” about this process of remembering and forgetting’. In other words, significance relies on relational systems that are discursively produced (Alvesson, 2004). For an item to be designated as significant, there must be a set of sanctioned practices which are legitimized through socially constructed definitions that reflect systems of thought (discourses) and produce particular forms of subjectivity (Foucault, 1977, 1980).

In Australia, for example, definitions of significance are recast from the cultural heritage definitions that are used to underpin criteria developed within the discourse of archaeological science and built heritage. The revised edition of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) Burra Charter, adopted in 1999, is concerned with the conservation of natural, indigenous and historic places. The Charter defines cultural significance according to aesthetic, historical, scientific or social value. According to the Charter, cultural significance is ‘embodied in the place, fabric and setting, use, associations, meanings, records and related places and related objects’ (ICOMOS, 1999).

Definitions of significance in the contexts of documentary heritage adopt this characterization within Western collecting or assigning organizations. In general, for documentary and cultural heritage, significance refers not just to the physical fabric or appearance of an object. It incorporates all the elements that contribute to an object’s meaning,
including context, history, uses and social and spiritual values. Significance is not fixed; it can increase or diminish over time (Russell, 2001, p. 11). This seems to suggest that the fabric of collective memory can be woven and altered as perceptions of significance change over time. Thus it contradicts the Memory of the World’s charter to guard against ‘collective amnesia’ and begs the question: at what point does an item’s significance diminish to the extent that it should be removed from the Program’s register?

Any determination of social or spiritual values requires a subjective understanding of these elements in time and space. Such a determination would be difficult to make outside of an item’s context. For example, the idea that non-indigenous communities might be able to interpret, let alone develop a deep subjective understanding of, the intrinsic importance of items of spiritual value to an indigenous group has been criticized as paternalistic and as failing to understand the complexities and systems of those indigenous communities which may even control the rights of their own members to identify and interpret materials of significance. Because of this, Sloggett (2005, p. 121) has posited: ‘cultural significance is after all a very relative construct. Could members who make up the Memory of the World assessment panels recognize the real significance of a document proposed by a cultural minority? Or would they want to?’

The same problem underlies criteria that are intended to be used in the assessment of social values. The unavoidable
questions must be asked: Whose social values? Which voices would determine them? Which interpretations would be deemed valuable? Archivist Terry Cook (2001, p. 7) recognizes the problem. He argues that:

no text is a mere innocent by-product of action ... but rather a consciously constructed product, although that consciousness may be so transformed into semi- or even unconscious patterns of social behaviour, organization process and information presentation that the link to external realities and power relationships is quite hidden. Texts (which include images) are all a form of narration more concerned with building consistency and harmony for the author, enhancing position and ego, conforming to organization norms and rhetorical discourse patterns, then they are evidence of acts or facts, or juridical or legal frameworks. And there is not one narrative in a series or collection of records but many narratives, many stories, serving many purposes for many audiences across time and space (2001, p. 7).

Significance methodology requires those who apply it to ‘tease out the unique characteristics and meanings of each object or collection’ (Russell, 2001, p. 1). This is done against an established and agreed-upon set of objective and subjective criteria, encompassing historic, aesthetic, scientific, social and spiritual attributes. Harvey (2003), in discussing the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme, points out that the process which results in inclusions on the register ‘is also the subject of much politicking, and the logic for inclusion
or exclusion of nominations is not always clear to the outside observer’ (Harvey, 2003, p. 138).

Lost and Missing Documentary Heritage

Recently, at the request of the Australian Memory of the World Program, Lloyd, Harvey and Lodge attempted to establish a method of recording lost and missing documentary heritage (Lloyd, Harvey & Lodge, 2005). This attempt confirmed the elusiveness of the concept of significance. Review of an item’s significance may result in its removal from a register or from a collection, or it may fail the significance assessment altogether, because its importance, impact or relationship to other events are either not recognized by national committees responsible for a register or are contested by those committees. The ambiguity of the concept of significance emerged as an important theme from responses to a pilot survey aimed at identifying lost and missing documentary heritage. In particular, reconciling local collective memory with national significance selection criteria was problematic (Lloyd, Harvey & Lodge 2005). This research led Lloyd, Harvey and Lodge to conclude that significance is a ‘relative’ concept and that its meaning must be reconsidered and recast to include local and regional significance, to recognize that local and regional events ultimately shape national memory. Their study also found evidence of the importance to a community’s memory of the impact of accidental loss of documents and of their intentional removal from preservation schedules.
Yorke (2000) draws attention to the tensions experienced by archivists when a single community view – usually that of the dominant governing or funding body – is imposed on appraisal practices. In Australia such imposition has in the past led to the destruction of case file records which documented the separation of indigenous children from their families – files ‘whose contents would embarrass the government’ (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997 cited in Yorke, 2000, p. 27). The destruction of these records constitutes a loss of explicit and codified memory for these families, the community and the nation, and continues to hinder reconciliation among these groups. Community attitudes to past practices and to the need for reconciliation have altered considerably in the last 70 years. The case files contained evidence of contemporary social values – evidence of the consequences of intervention which is now seen as important for future generations.

Further Considerations
While the term significance can be easily defined, the concept of significance is slippery and elusive. It can be understood in different ways by different groups at different points in time; its interpretation is reliant on the agency of institutions. When asked to determine an item’s significance, organizations can readily provide a definition and a methodology to be used in the assessment of significance. This process, overarched by the legitimizing narratives of dominant groups, indirectly influences what is selected and whether funding will be provided to ensure long-term preservation strategies. Significance is not ‘out there’ as a unified or
objective concept; it is something that has been created by various techniques, including methodologies that reflect vested interests and ways of knowing. This creates problems for programs such as the Memory of the World, which claims an interest in safeguarding against collective amnesia.

To assert that objectivity in the determination of significance can be demonstrated through application of significance methodologies is to deny questions about the centrality and power of discourses that act to inform material practices, which position an object with the collective consciousness of community, and designate it as significant. The position of assessing an item’s value or worth to a community or a nation against a formulated set of criteria appears reductionist; it assumes that core values and beliefs about what is worth remembering are common to the diverse groups which constitute a society.

Significance is a social construct. Its meaning will always be a product of temporal, spatial and social considerations that are underpinned by social, political, historical and economic acts. As a social action the designation of significance marginalizes minorities and effectively silences voices that may contest the dominant remembering of a community. In effect, designating items of documentary heritage as significant delimits a society’s collective memory and leaves it vulnerable to decisions which may over time selectively deny other voices or strands of remembering, thus thinning the fabric of collective memory to mere threads.
In arguing for or against an item’s significance, ethical implications need to be acknowledged: Whose voices are being silenced? Whose voices are being heard? What are the long-term implications of these actions?

Encouraging debate
As Raven (2004) so graphically illustrates in *Lost Libraries*, the loss of collective memory is a tangible reality, as libraries and their collections throughout the ages and around the world become symbolic targets for groups who wish to eradicate or alter collective memory through loss, alteration, removal or intentional destruction of those collections. This reality makes it critical for librarians to engage in debate about significance. They must recognize the implications of assigning significance and the long-lasting ramifications of this action on collective memory. It is in this context, and in the spirit of exploration adopted by this paper, that the following questions are posed to stimulate debate among members of the library profession:

1. How do we reveal our reflective processes, biases and subjectivities in the designation of significance? Determinations of significance are always subjective; a primary role for librarians involved in making these determinations is to place themselves in the context of the decision-making. This may include revealing our own subjective positioning (e.g. social, economic, historic and political influences).
2. How do we demonstrate our ethical position and ensure that the influences on our decision-making are visible?

3. How do we bring into any consideration of significance the voices that propose and contest designation of significance, but which are critical to a holistic encapsulation of collective memory?

4. Do we avoid significance designation altogether? Should we focus on representation which can be framed within distinct historical, social or economic periods and which actively recognizes both dominant and marginalized or silenced voices?

5. How do we ensure that actions in designating significance are free from vested interests, political or economic influences?

The question posed in the title of this paper is rhetorical and, as Pymm (2006) has suggested, there probably is no single definitive answer. The reason for this rests in the problematic construct of significance, and in library scholars’ and practitioners’ unwillingness to engage in debate about the underlying themes that motivate and drive the designation of significance. Yet it is critical that librarians do think about these themes and debate them, both among themselves and with those in allied professional groups. It is critical that they collaborate with all groups who claim a role in society as keepers of collective memory to find answers to questions raised in this paper. The consequences of not doing so will be narrow and structured remembering, which
will fail to reflect the rich diversity of cultural life and will heighten the threat of collective amnesia.

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