Local studies: a reaction to the global village

Jan Partridge, president, National Local Studies section

Committed enthusiasts of local studies have for many years worked to ensure that their local 'patches' have been cherished and preserved. Their devotion to their cause has in the main been unnoticed and unacknowledged in the wider community. With the introduction of the concept of the global village, people have been encouraged to think globally, not locally, and interest in communities declined. This idea of a global village has been supported and encouraged through the growth of the Internet, so that although one is an ideology and one a technology, we have come to accept them as being the same. They are not, and misconceptions occur with both.

The global network (the Internet), has been accepted as a total resource for access to information, for communication, and for acquiring knowledge, even at a local level. There has been a presumption that this network could, should, and does, provide access to all the information available in the world. While the global network is successfully accessed by millions of people world-wide, and users develop 'communities of interest' with like-minded people, this interaction is still controlled by the technology and the availability of resources. Despite the joy of being able to access government, commercial and some specialist material, access to primary source material of interest to historians is negligible. Researchers may peruse websites and library catalogues across the world with great gusto, but the archives, manuscripts, ephemera and out-of-print books are simply not accessible. The issue is critical for local studies material which is currently very poorly represented. Opportunities for networking local studies collections are rapidly expanding and local studies professionals must ask themselves if access to the material is the main issue, or should a global network replace face-to-face contact, the experience of the senses, and the ambience of the physical environment?

Local and public history enthusiasts must ask themselves the questions, should local history resources be available world-wide? In what format should they be presented? Who are the beneficiaries? What will be the impact on local communities if this information can only be accessed electronically? Can the cost be justified or would money and effort be better spent in co-operative efforts in compiling indexes and bibliographies at a regional and national level? Because of the uniqueness of this local material it may be very valuable but only to a limited audience. Studying the original in its cultural environment may well reveal a wealth of pertinent but hitherto unknown information.

Further, what will be the impact on local communities if the emphasis is to make resources available internationally? Will the community lose cultural control? Are we to consider that physical, cultural and emotional attachment to a particular locality is no longer acceptable? In the social sense the term 'global village' is an oxymoron. A 'village' denotes a small community of people belonging to a defined locality, with common experiences and memories of activities, events and people connected with that region as well as the wider community.

Dr Geoff Gallop in his paper at the *Timekeepers: forging links in local studies* conference (Perth, 1997), stressed that the move toward, and acceptance of, non-residential communities could result in a breakdown in neighbourliness, an increased gap between rich and poor, and the collapse of 'local identity, local memory, local participation, and local facilities'. It is this fragmentation which is causing a resurgence of interest in local studies. In an age of high technology, where the cultural emphasis is on global events, there is a yearning for a tangible connection with the past and a community which nurtures and supports.

The power of a strong local studies collection together with dynamic personalities can provide a catalyst for re-creating a sense of local identity and a vision for the future. The library profession has a key role to play in fostering co-operation among diverse community groups to make sure sufficient funding is made available for the retention, preservation, and access to these unique records. Public libraries can play a major part in supporting local communities. Discussions on professional standards and recognition of social and cultural, as well as information and technology needs, should take place at a national, regional and local level to preserve not only the records but the uniqueness of the local community. In preserving the local identity we contribute to the preservation of our national identity. ∎

Local studies discussion list

aliaLOCAL is an electronic discussion/mailing list (listserv) for librarians and others interested in local studies librarianship, local history and heritage issues in Australia. The list is organised by the ALIA Local Studies national section. Launched in December 1997, the list is open to anyone who wishes to join. aliaLOCAL is not a moderated list, and any messages posted to aliaLOCAL are automatically sent to all subscribers.

aliaLOCAL was launched following the First ALIA National Local Studies conference in South Perth, Western Australia, in September 1997. In the spirit of that conference, entitled *Timekeepers: forging links in local studies*, the aim of aliaLOCAL is to forge links between: historical researchers and local communities; new directions in local history and the broader community; previous generations and their descendants; theory and practice in local studies librarianship; historic records and people who use them; new technological developments in accessing and managing local history resources for local studies professionals and historical researchers. For more information (including subscription instructions), take a look at the ALIAnet listserv web pages at http://www.alia.org.au/alianet/listservs. Please direct any enquiries, concerns or problems to the aliaLOCAL listowner: Roger Horgan rhorgan@ois.com.au ∎