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Copyright restrains access: Lundy

By Sally Pryor
Cultural Institutions Reporter

Many cultural institutions are keen for their collections to be more accessible, but mass digitisation costs time and money, and may not reflect the rights of creators.

This, in a nutshell, was the agreement reached at a conference hosted this week by Wikimedia Australia, the non-profit national chapter of the global volunteers who create Wikipedia.

About 170 representatives from cultural institutions around Australia gathered at the Australian War Memorial to discuss strategies to better share Australia's cultural heritage, and highlight some of the inherent problems with making entire collections accessible online.

ACT Senator Kate Lundy, who gave yesterday's keynote address, said digitising collections was essential, but issues such as restrictive copyright laws were an extra layer of constraint.

"At the moment, the copyright treatment of cultural assets is complex and confusing. While you would expect some degree of complexity for works still under copyright, it shouldn't be confusing," she said.

"Whether it is a teacher, an academic, the media, a business, a local council, community club or your daughter's Facebook, we all ought to be able to freely access the cultural assets of our national institutions, which by definition are held in custodianship of behalf of the people of Australia."

But Ian McDonald, from the Australian Copyright Council, pointed out that there were massive resourcing issues involved in digitising collections, and that making things available online would not necessarily encourage innovation.

He said there were various complex issues involved, including indigenous collections and the interests of artists and donors, which did not necessarily accord with the vision of Wikimedia.

Jessica Coates, who runs the Creative Commons Clinic at the University of Queensland, said it was concerning that so many public assets were being "locked up in perpetuity", and she hoped the conference would encourage the archiving industry to be less risk-averse in the digital arena.



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