

# Liberating lives: invisible Australians and biographical networks

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**Slides are** [available on Slideshare](#).

This palm print belongs to a 12-year-old boy called Charlie Allen.

Charlie was born in Sydney in 1896.

His mother was Frances Allen (sometime sweet shop owner and brothel keeper), his father Charlie Gum (a buyer for Wing On company).

Charlie was raised by his mother, but in 1909, at the age of 13, he was taken to China by his father.

His father returned to Sydney, leaving Charlie in China. He lived with relatives in the town of Shekki (inland from Hong Kong) for 6 years.

Charlie was homesick, but had no means of getting back to Australia. His mother attempted to enlist government help but to no avail. Charlie finally returned in 1915.

The following year he enlisted in First AIF (well actually he enlisted three times, and was discharged as medically unfit each time).

Charlie married in Sydney in 1917 and had two daughters soon after. He returned to China in 1922 for 7 months.





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An identity form relating to his trip to China in 1922:



NAA: SP42/1, C1922/4449

But of course Charlie is not alone in the archives.

Charlie's father was Chinese, he was therefore categorised as a 'half-caste', as someone who was not white, and fell under the restrictions imposed by the White Australia Policy.

The certificate from 1909 granted Charlie an exemption to the Dictation Test. Without it, he may not have been allowed back into the country.

Every time one of many thousands of non-Europeans resident in Australia sought to travel overseas and return home again they needed one of these certificates.

We're all of course familiar with the general outlines of the White Australia Policy, and the way it underpinned conceptions of Australia as a nation in the first half of the 20th century.

But what we sometimes forget is that it was also a massive bureaucratic exercise.

Forms and certificates were printed, issued, used and filed. Regulations were modified, guidelines were distributed and administering officers were managed and advised. Individual cases were reviewed, policy was changed and new forms and certificates were printed, issued, used and filed...

For example, between 1901 and 1911, 400 circulars were issued to port officers about immigration restriction. The confidential manual on immigration restriction grew from one page in 1902 to more than 200 in 1912.

Much of this system is now preserved in the National Archives.

For the years between 1902 and 1948 there remain:

- More than 50,000 CEDTs
- 90 shelf metres of records
- 15,000 case files

And within those many thousands of files are the scattered fragments of lives such as Charlie's — lives that were controlled, monitored and documented in a vain attempt to make Australia 'white'.

We've already seen today some wonderful examples of how these fragments, these slivers of existence, can be found, extracted, aggregated and displayed. But I think it's worth considering for a moment what happens when we do this.

The historian Tim Hitchcock, behind projects such as the [Old Bailey Online](#) and [London Lives](#), has reflected on the impact of digitisation on our access to archives. Archives, he notes, tend to reflect the assumptions and practices of the institutions that created them.

But by providing new ways into these records systems, technology can undermine the power relations that persist within their structures.

'What changes', asks Tim Hitchcock, 'when we examine the world through the collected fragments of knowledge that we can recover about a single person, reorganised as a biographical narrative, rather than as part of an archival system?'<sup>1</sup>

I don't know, but I think we should find out, don't you?

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I hope you've all collected a [mini card](#). These themselves provide a little glimpse at the real face of White Australia and I'd invite you all to head over to the [National Archives website](#), do battle with the monster that is [RecordSearch](#), and look up the file references that are on each card.

The cards are part of a project that [Kate Bagnall](#) and I are trying to develop — [Invisible Australians](#).

I should note too that the cards, and most of the examples I'm showing you here today are the product of Kate's [long and detailed research into Chinese-Australian families](#). In modern project management parlance, Kate is the domain expert, while I am merely the technical resource.

If we look again at one of the CEDTs, we can see that there's a lot of useful structured data:

- name
- place of birth
- age
- height
- destination
- date of departure
- name of ship

*Invisible Australians* has the modest aim of extracting this data from the 50,000+ forms in the National Archives. But of course that's just the start, because each person might have used a number of certificates — so then it's a matter of matching these identities.

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<http://invisibleaustralians.org>

And then there are a range of other related forms, not to mention case files, alien registration documents, naturalisation applications...

Obviously we can't do it alone. We'll be creating a crowdsourcing tool to extract and link the data.

It's ridiculously ambitious, totally unfunded and is likely to take over our lives.

Is it worth it?

Imagine being able to navigate the network of lives, families and relationships. To follow their journeys, to share their tragedies, to celebrate their small victories against a repressive system.

Imagine being able to watch them age.

### **Pauline Ah Hee and Shadee Khan**

Is it worth it? We think so.

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For Tim Hitchcock technology opens up the possibility of writing a new history from below, exploring how the poor, the marginalised and the powerless navigated the institutions of the modern state. But it's not just about search engines and databases. He talks about making 'best use of the technology of emotions and representation — how you use words and pictures and a story to impact, not just on what people think, but what they see in their mind's eye'.<sup>2</sup>

In this project, the photos matter. I hope the irony in our project title is obvious.

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This is the real face of White Australia.

The photos remind us that the project is not just about shifting data around — these are lives, these are people.

But this brings its own challenge, for if we are seeking to liberate these lives from the fragmentation and obscurity of bureaucratic systems then we should be asking what are we liberating them into?

A database?

This is not just an exercise in data creation and management. We also have to think carefully and creatively about issues of representation, access and discovery.

We have to give these lives back their freedom to associate, to have relationships, to make connections.

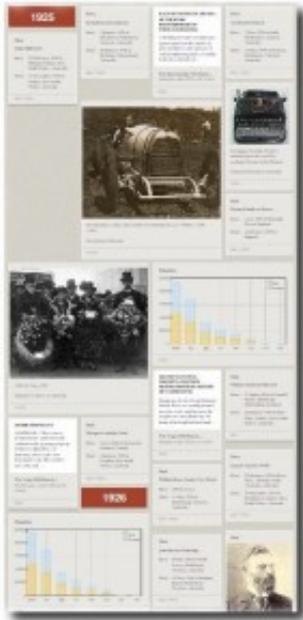
We need to embed these lives in a variety of contexts and combinations. To make room for serendipity, celebration, sadness, and yes, even play.

We need to bring these lives into a rich and ongoing conversation with the world.

But how?

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I've been working on a little experiment for the National Museum of Australia called [The History Wall](#). What the History Wall does is quite simple, it pulls together data on the fly from a variety of sources including [People Australia](#), the [Australian Dictionary of Biography](#), the [National Library's newspapers project](#), [historical population data](#) from the Bureau of Statistics, photos from the Flickr accounts of the PowerHouse Museum and the National Archives, and the [collection database](#) of the National Museum itself. It chooses randomly from all this stuff, throws the results up into the air and then displays them however they happen to fall. No two views are ever quite the same.



<http://defining.net.au/wall/>

It's something more than a timeline. To me it's more like a celebration of context and serendipity. There's a richness to it, a sense of discovery and fun, but there's also fragility — next time you look it might be gone.

It's a bit like history itself.

It's a bit like the world.

How do we create spaces for our data to merge and mingle? How do we encourage the development of new contexts and connections?

I think the first thing we have to do is stop thinking about databases and dictionaries, registers and encyclopaedias. Don't get me wrong, I'm not being critical of the wonderful projects we've seen today. I just think we can use all this work better if we stop thinking about individual resources and start developing on a web scale, on a global scale.

Yes, we have the technology. Time today has spared you from a detailed discourse on the Semantic Web, but I do want to focus on one aspect.

You may have heard of Linked Data, it's [a set of guidelines](#) to help you publish your data to the Semantic Web. There are only four basic principles and I'm only going to talk about one of them. It's one of those deceptively simple things. You look at it and think, 'yeah, ok', but before too long it's starting to turn your brain inside out.

**Use URLs to identify things in the real world.**

Yeah, ok...

You know what URLs are, web addresses, the things you type in your browser's location field.

And hopefully you know what things in the real world are: people, places, objects, events, ideas...

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Now you may have detected a problem here, because no matter how many times you click the refresh button, your web browser is not going to be able to use such a URL to magically deliver you the real world thing.

Well, unless you're on eBay.

Fortunately, the Linked Data guidelines provide for a bit of technical trickery that allow your browser to retrieve not the real world thing, but some information about that thing — perhaps in the form of a web page.

Why bother?

Names are powerful.

We share and use names to talk about things. Computers are the same. If we use URLs to identify things in the real world, then computers can start talking about them.

We can define and explore real-world relationships in an online environment. We can create rich, meaningful linkages across databases, across disciplines, across the world.

We can start building and thinking on a web scale.

\*\*\*\*\*

Thanks to the People Australia project, I can confidently claim that this is me:

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.party-479364#foaf:Person>

I keep meaning to get it on a t-shirt.

The most exciting thing about People Australia is not the EAC records or the aggregation of resources — it's the identifiers, because they enable us to say things about people anywhere on the web that computers can understand and relate back to a specific real world entity — a person.

You can start doing it now with [Wragge's Identity Browser](#).



<http://wraggelabs.com/identities/>

This is a little tool I built using the People Australia API. It makes it easy to find identifiers for

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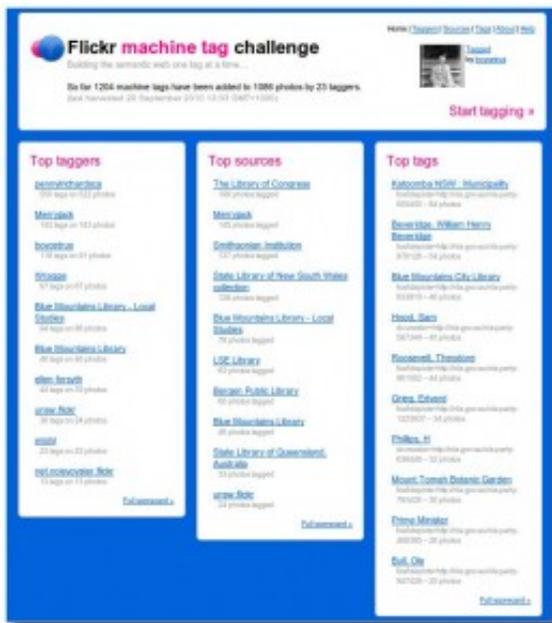
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people and organisations, and it supplies you with some code that you can drop into a blog post or web page that will tell a computer that a name relates to a thing called a 'person', that this person's name has a certain standard form, and that this person can be uniquely identified by People Australia.

Even if you don't publish a website or a blog, you can use People Australia identifiers to build semantic linkages. Wragge's Identity Browser also creates machine tags for you. Machine tags are like normal tags but with built in semantics. When coupled with identifiers they enable you to do some pretty powerful things.

You could for example use machine tags in Flickr to tell computers that a certain photo depicts a person uniquely identified by People Australia. In fact, people have been doing just that.



<http://wraggelabs.com/fmtc/>

The [Flickr Machine Tag Challenge](#) is a sort of scoreboard that I built to encourage people to start adding People Australia enriched machine tags to photos. More than 1200 tags have been added to over 1000 photos. Feel free to join in!

The point is that the technologies already exist to enable us to build web scale biographical resources. Not dictionaries or databases as we know them, but networks capable of constant expansion, elaboration, and cooperation.

What we need are more tools to make it simple, recipes to make it obvious, examples and applications to make it popular, and leadership to make it all seem possible.

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Of course most of the lives we hope to liberate through Invisible Australians will not be represented in People Australia.

Not yet.

But Invisible Australians will offer a point of aggregation and disambiguation that will enable our



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