

## **Sydney Morning Herald – Friday, March 21<sup>st</sup> – Opinion.**

### **Michael Duffy**

For years they've been saying the internet would replace the book, but so far it hasn't. It's certainly reduced the time many of us spend reading books, but that's not the same thing.

In fact, it's still rare to find an example of anyone deciding to publish in cyberspace rather than in book form. But Sydney has decided to leap into this future.

A few years ago a publisher approached Shirley Fitzgerald, historian for the City of Sydney, with a proposal for an encyclopedia of the city, similar to one that had just been done for Melbourne.

Similar books have been published in many cities around the world, especially in the United States. A big city needs a big book, or so it was felt.

Fitzgerald discussed this with other experts and they decided Sydney did indeed need an encyclopedia. But due to advances in technology and the way we use it, a book was no longer the way to go. The project would be done digitally.

It was a landmark decision: the team now working on the project is not aware of another city that has started a similar project on this scale. There are plenty of city encyclopedias online, but they are based on books and this makes them relatively limited in their scope.

The project is called the Dictionary of Sydney. Thanks to a lot of help from organisations such as the University of Sydney and the State Library, and dozens of volunteer writers and researchers, it is now well under way.

It is supported by a million-dollar grant from the Australian Research Council, although much more will be needed to do the thing properly. The scale of the project is enormous, due not only to the quantity of information available, but the many ways in which that information can be used.

A lay person might assume that the first step in the project would be to build a website. But this is only one way in which the information can be formatted and presented. Others already exist (for example, books, CDs and DVDs), and no doubt more will be created.

Stewart Wallace, the project manager, says: "One possibility would be to send the information through mobile phones with positioning devices.

"Someone could walk around the city and listen to commentary on their phone, related to where they were. They could stand in front of a building and see photos of how it used to look on their screen."

A futuristic version of this is described in William Gibson's novel *Spook Country*, where someone wearing goggles and a lightweight helmet can actually "see" things that are not there. This is done by what one of his characters calls "spatially tagged hypermedia", with the help of GPS co-ordinates. One day you might be able to stand

at Woolloomooloo and watch troop ships sailing off to war, or migrant ships arriving in the 1960s.

Because of the enormous potential of technology, the dictionary team decided their first step was to create a vast repository of digital information, which will be able to be used in many different ways. The website, which the team hopes to launch later this year, will be only the first of these.

The nearest thing to the Sydney project is Te Ara, a New Zealand website. Started in 2002, it has a budget of NZ\$12 million (\$12.4 million), a staff of 20, and it will take another four years to get all the subject areas it wants to cover online.

Its founder and general editor is the historian Jock Phillips, who says the site attracts between 6000 and 10,000 visitors a day, half of them from outside New Zealand. "It's a great way to attract international interest to New Zealand," he told the *Herald*.

Phillips says Thailand has embarked on a national online project, and America has launched a scoping exercise to look at creating one for every state.

A big change in approaches to the internet since Te Ara was conceived is the move to user-generated content, such as is found at Wikipedia. Phillips says Te Ara looked at this possibility, but decided that commissioned authors would form the basis for its content, because of the need for so much expert knowledge.

The Dictionary of Sydney has made a similar decision, although it is keen to find ways to encourage Sydneysiders to enrich the dictionary with their stories and experiences.

The online Sydney Journal was launched last week to help attract material for the dictionary. Its first issue includes articles on popular culture, birth, housing and transport in Sydney, six of the city's ethnic groups, and five of its suburbs.

The dictionary seems an excellent idea. At the *Herald's* recent round table discussion about the state of the city, several people noted the relative absence of a shared public culture here. In Melbourne, in contrast, people and companies and organisations seem to have more interest in each other and in the general interests of the city.

The Dictionary of Sydney should enhance our awareness of each other and of the city we share.

The dictionary is looking for wealthy benefactors. Says Emma Grahame, editorial co-ordinator: "The Mitchell Library exists thanks to David Scott Mitchell. We'd love to meet his modern equivalent."

**Dictionary of Sydney project site:**

**[www.dictionaryofsydney.org](http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org)Sydney Journal**

**[http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/sydney\\_journal](http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/sydney_journal)**