Literary Journals in Australia

A summary prepared by Creative Australia

Acknowledgement

Creative Australia and Western Sydney University proudly acknowledge all First Nations peoples and their rich culture of the country we now call Australia. We acknowledge First Nations peoples as Australia's First Peoples and as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters on which we live.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of First Nations peoples and communities to Australian life, and how this continuation of 75,000 years of unbroken storytelling enriches us. We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards ensuring an equal voice and the equality of outcomes in all aspects of our society.

Introduction

Literary journals and magazines – and the small publishers and independent literary organisations that produce them – are key components of Australia's literary landscape.

They offer platforms for writers and creative workers to develop their skills, to encounter peers and audiences, and to build their careers. Through literary journals, audiences in Australia and around the world encounter new work, new ideas, new writers, and new forms of practice.

Literary journals publish new work on a regular basis in print and/or digital format. They also present public events, workshops, mentorship programs and book-length publications. They do this to build communities around their journals, to connect with their audiences, and to provide opportunities for writers.

The purpose of this research was to understand how literary journals function as organisations and to investigate potential operational models, mechanisms and support structures that may enable sustainability and continued productivity in the coming decades.

This research shows that all Australian literary journals are small to medium literary organisations, but may differ in scale and organisational models. Some have been published in print since the 1940s, while others began in print and have adapted to digital spaces or have only ever published online. Funding models vary; while government funding may be a major contributor for some organisations, others may be more commercialised. This research highlights the varied forms of cultural value delivered by literary journals, as well as challenges experienced by literary journals in maintaining skills, connecting with audiences and paying artists and creative workers fair renumeration.

This work was conducted by Catriona Menzies-Pike from Western Sydney University and Samuel Ryan from the University of Tasmania, supported by funding from Creative Australia (previously known as Australia Council for the Arts). For the full report, see the website.

Methodology

The project was based on **interviews** with 22 editors and directors of Australian literary journals and a **survey** completed by 29 literary journal organisations. Key focus areas were **digital practice, audience engagement**, and **remuneration** for artists and creative workers.

Key findings

Cultural value of literary journals

- **The primary goal of a literary journal is to commission, develop and publish new work.** Literary journals publish essays, reviews, poetry, short fiction, memoir and cross-media work. They foster innovation and experimentalism by publishing work that is unlikely to appear elsewhere. They capture the range and diversity of contemporary Australian writing, and often offer insights into Australian literature and culture that may differ to the broader publishing industry.
- **Literary journals provide a platform for writers and offer opportunities for exposure to new audiences, income and professional development.** Literary journals are spaces where writers can trial new ideas, approaches, and short-form methodologies. Many journals contribute to social change by undertaking work that challenges established viewpoints and providing a space for marginalised writers (eg, First Nations writers, diasporic writers, queer and disabled writers) who may otherwise be excluded from participating in the literature sector.

'Literary journals really are the breeding grounds and the petri dish of new talent.'

(Kent MacCarter, *Cordite Poetry Review*)

- **Literary journals play a role in building communities of writers and readers.** Many journals run programs of events beyond publishing, such as writing groups, workshops, mentorships and prizes. Such events build cultural communities and connect writers to each other.
- **The reach and impact of literary journals is not well understood, especially when it comes to digital audiences.** Journal publishers often collect data through Google Analytics or their website hosting platform, but these sources do not provide granular demographic data on audiences and engagement. Journals need support and guidance to be able to measure and report engagement with their publications, which will enable them to better understand their audiences.

The transition to digital

- **Most Australian literary journals publish part of their program online, and several exist only in digital form.** The move to digital publishing has been largely driven by media convergence and the increasing cost of print publishing. The COVID-19 pandemic served in part as a catalyst for literary journals' changing attitudes towards the potential of digital publications.

- **Despite the move to digital, print remains highly significant to literary organisations, writers and readers.** Some organisations present a selection of their print content online, while others curate a separate program for their digital audience.

- **Digital publication is cheap, accessible, flexible and has broader reach than print publications.** Digital publication makes space for new work that does not fit into print publications, or that needs to be published more quickly. New journals that launch with no budget have a strong incentive to start publishing online rather than in print. Digital publication tools also allow publishing teams to effectively collaborate with colleagues across the country and the globe.

- **Digital tools help literary journals publish work, reach and build audiences, manage subscriptions and submissions, and connect staff and contributors.** However, a lack of skills, funding and time prevents organisations from tapping the potential of digital publishing, audience development and other forms of marketing.

- **Despite its advantages, developing infrastructure for digital publication can be challenging to resource.** It is expensive to develop digital infrastructure, and there is very limited public funding available to undertake this work. This is compounded by the fact that digital publication does not provide substantial income for organisations, especially compared to print. Finding and recruiting digital contractors can be difficult, especially for smaller organisations. Responsive digital design (online layouts that are designed to reformat according to the size of the device on which they are viewed) can also cause problems for poetry, which often relies on visual text placement.

- **Managing and preserving digital archives can be more challenging than with print media, requiring additional training and equipment.** Some publishers worry that online-only work may become obsolete or impossible to trace. Literary organisations are not well served in terms of practical support or funding for digital technology, which presents challenges for archiving, distribution and accessibility.

'These things can disappear without trace. In a print format, we've got every copy of the magazine back to 1979. [...] But where is Islet [Island's previous website]? Islet is on a server in our office that could easily be lost.'

(Vern Field, *Island*)

'If you have a focus on community, but your community can't access the journal or work you're publishing, what's the point? You can't simply assume that everyone will be able to access or purchase the book or publication. It needs to be available, and the digital medium allows for this.'

(Leah Jing McIntosh, *Liminal*)

Labour

- **Most staff in literary organisations are paid, but pay rates vary.** Most organisations employ staff on a combination of casual, contract and part-time arrangements. Few organisations can offer staff a liveable wage, which leads to high staff turnover as employees seek higher wages. Organisations of all sizes have difficulty sourcing income or funding for new positions.

- **Literary organisations would like to pay their staff better, but many prioritise artist payments over staff payments.** Funding to pay contributors is typically more accessible than funding to pay staff. Organisations are wary of asking peer-based funding panels for support for staff, concerned that asking for higher rates of pay for staff would compromise their ability to secure funding.

- **Low pay, insecure work arrangements and lack of paid staff positions entrench a lack of diversity in literary organisations.** Creative workers from culturally and linguistically diverse and/or working-class backgrounds and First Nations creative workers are poorly represented in literary organisations. Most organisations wish to recruit more diverse workers, but the very low rates of pay available to creative workers make it difficult to recruit beyond an already engaged, middle-class workforce. This in turn restricts the ability of organisations to provide culturally appropriate editorial guidance and other forms of support to writers from diverse backgrounds.

'It's a continual struggle to pay all the people we want to pay and to be paid ourselves.'

(Hollen Singleton, *Going Down Swinging*)

Funding and Investment

- **Many organisations rely on government project funding to deliver their programs.** This type of funding often operates as a form of de facto operational funding. However, project funding is unpredictable, irregular, and rarely supports organisations to pay their core staff.

- **Literary organisations often lack the administrative resources required to apply for funding, especially philanthropic funding.** Although organisations are encouraged to seek non-government sources of funding, most find this unrealistic without the resources and knowledge to access philanthropy or run fundraising campaigns. Small and emerging organisations often have difficulty navigating complex and onerous funding application processes.[1]

- **Emerging and micro-organisations often cannot access operational funding,** due to eligibility criteria and/or an inability to compete with larger organisations. Australian literary organisations are highly diverse in size and structure, and a one-size fits all approach to funding and policy does not meet the needs of the sector.

Cooperation and collaboration

- **Literary journal editors and creative workers want to work more closely with their peers across the literary sector to share knowledge, collaborate and gain mentorship.** However, they lack the contacts or staff resources to advance such interactions. Many editors of emerging organisations wished they'd been able to access mentorship or connect with more experienced peers in the sector, especially to help navigate funding opportunities and establish governance processes.

'The cycle of funding is exhausting. And it contributes to burnout significantly. And it also leaves us really vulnerable, because it's very hard to create any sort of long-term strategy, when you're thinking year by year in project terms.'

(Catherine Noske, *Westerly*)

'The thing around collaboration is that the resources we have, and by that I mean the time and staffing, are so restricted that it's really hard to think outside of our own everyday operations, to think beyond just basically surviving.

(Rebecca Starford, *Kill Your Darlings*)

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1   The Australia Cultural Fund (ACF) exists to build fundraising capacity in the arts and cultural sector, particularly for individual artists and small to medium arts organisations. Journals such as Liminal can use the ACF to raise funds for their organisations and build awareness with potential donors.

Recommendations

The *Literary Journals in Australia* report made specific recommendations for government, research, and literary journals. These recommendations are:

- **Make the work of literary journals and their cultural impact visible** in funding allocations, in policy design, and in the structure of representative bodies.
- **Address the chronic rates of underpay in the sector**, and provide clarity to organisations and grant assessors regarding pay and conditions for artists and arts workers.
- **Support positions for First Nations creative workers and creative workers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds**, especially for leadership and creative decision-making roles.
- **Invest in digital infrastructure for literary journals**, including funding for support and training in digital technologies and digital audience development.
- **Support emerging and micro-organisations** to apply for funding.
- **Undertake further research into the experiences of First Nations creative workers and creative workers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the literary sector**, especially regarding recruitment and retention.
- **Explore opportunities for cooperation and collaboration between literary journals** in a manner that acknowledges the distinct needs of diverse organisations.