

Editorial: Donald Trump and the Royal Society of NSW

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Editor

Is there a connection? Yes. Let me explain. Bear with me.

When I became Editor in 2016 I indexed the 148 volumes of the *Journal & Proceedings* from 1867 to 2015. The volumes had been scanned by the Biodiversity Heritage Library (BHL), and the PDFs placed on their servers. The back issues of the *Journal* were available, sort of: each issue had been scanned, as a whole. That is, there was no easy way to access a particular paper.

So I spent six solid weeks indexing each paper in the 148 volumes: on what became the *Journal* archive page I listed the bibliographic details of each paper (author, title, pagination, date, etc.) but also the URL of the paper in the BHL repository, with a live link. This allows the researcher to jump to the paper.

What I had done, I have since learnt, is generate the meta-data for each paper. In time the meta-data made it easy for the BHL to generate a unique number for each paper, its DOI, or Digital Object Identifier. A DOI is a digital identifier of an object, in this case a paper. DOIs solve a common problem: keeping track of things, in this case papers. A DOI is a unique number made up of a prefix and a suffix separated by a forward slash, such as 10.1000/182. It is resolvable by displaying it as a link:

<https://doi.org/10.1000/182>. DOIs identify objects persistently. They allow things to be uniquely identified and accessed reliably.

Earlier this year, I learnt that BHL Australia (the Australian arm of the US BHL, located at the Melbourne Museum) had successfully generated DOIs for all 3,386 papers in the 155 volumes of the *Journal* (1867–2022). We intend to add each paper's DOI to its bibliographic details on the issue pages in the Archive. We are extremely grateful for this service.¹

This is a great undertaking by BHL Australia, a national project working to digitise Australia's biodiversity literature and make it openly accessible online on the Biodiversity Heritage Library website.² BHL Australia is funded by the Atlas of Living Australia³ to make Australia's biodiversity knowledge openly accessible to everyone. Organisations contributing to BHL Australia include eight museums, eight herbaria, two state libraries, two universities (Melbourne and Monash), seven government institutes and agencies, six Royal Societies (including us), six naturalists' clubs, and sixteen other clubs, societies and networks.

What about Donald Trump, I hear you ask. Well, for the past 20 years, the Smithsonian Institution — one of BHL's ten founding members — has played the vital

¹ <https://www.royalsoc.org.au/society-publications/the-royal-society-of-nsw-journal/journal-archive/>

² To peruse the 500+ titles, 6700+ volumes and 660,000+ pages contributed to the BHL by Australian institutions, go to <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/browse/collection/bhlau>

³ <https://ala.org.au/>

role of hosting both the administrative and technical components of BHL. On April 22, it was announced that on January 1, 2026, the Smithsonian will no longer host the administrative functions of BHL. This change presents both a new challenge and a new opportunity. What does this mean if you are a BHL user? BHL is not going away. The content, data, and persistent identifiers (including DOIs) will remain secure, discoverable, and openly accessible.

Why is this rupture happening? In March, Donald Trump criticised the Smithsonian Institution over what he said were its “narratives that portray American and Western values as inherently harmful and oppressive.”⁴ In January, Trump had signed an executive order banning diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs at organisations receiving federal money. The Smithsonian receives nearly two-thirds of its \$1 billion budget from the federal government, as appropriated by Congress. Could the Biodiversity Heritage Library have attracted opprobrium? Unlikely, although it is possible. Or is it just that the Trump administration has threatened to cut the Smithsonian’s funding?

Whatever, I have been led to believe that the BHL has been cut adrift from the Smithsonian as a result of the Trump administration’s actions. This might affect the Royal Society’s receipt of further DOIs in the future, but I hope not.

The Forum and other papers

When we decided on the general topic for last year’s November Forum, “Democracy Under Threat,” we did not know who would

win the Presidential race in the USA. A week before the Forum we learnt that it was Donald Trump, in his second term. There was some discussion of what his re-election might mean. But I doubt that any in the room at Government House could have foreseen the impact on the workings of the US democracy that followed.⁵ As we have done before (Marks 2017), we praise three things in the Australian democracy: compulsory voting, preferential voting (ranking all candidates to avoid the run-off elections seen overseas), and the Australian Electoral Commission.

The six sessions of the Forum, as reported below, gave an opportunity to the 18 participants to reflect on trends in today’s democracies, including the USA. After the Governor had opened the Forum with some reflections on the topic, the sessions were: The Keynote — Democracy: the What, the Why and the How, by Philp Pettit; Session 1, Global Challenges to Democracy, with contributions from Hugh White, Deborah Cobb-Clark, and Quentin Grafton; Session 2, Challenges to Australian Democracy, with contributions from Jeni Whalan, Leila Smith, and Nick Bryant; Session 3, Technological Challenges to Democracy, with contributions from Ed Santow, Darren Saunders, and Fatemeh Vafaei; Session 4, Challenges to the Public Sphere: Educating for Democracy, with contributions from Carly Kind, Catherine Lumby, and Amanda Third. The Forum closed with a session culminating with the chairs of all the sessions: Peter Varghese, Peter Shergold, Sally Cripps, and Christina Slade, presided over by Mike Baird, a past premier of New South Wales.

4 Small and Schuessler (2025); Kennicott (2025).

5 Or the possible impact on the Royal Society of NSW.

Other papers in the issue include Barber's paper on so-called UNSW "Cadets," an effort sixty-odd years ago to attract more good undergraduate students in maths and physics to UNSW, then the new university on the block. It was apparently very successful, and many of the Cadets went on to very successful careers.

Brynn Hibbert and Graham Bell describe the development of their electronic nose, first at CSIRO and then at UNSW. They also describe the uses for which it has been employed.

Erik Aslaksen tells me he joined the Royal Society hoping to have more discussions about issues of interest apart from his professional areas. We include a paper of his on political ideology and economics. One of the referees of this paper (Chris Adam FRSN) has kindly written a brief commentary on Erik's paper, which puts it into better context.

Six years ago, Robert Clancy and his wife, Christine, organised and led a tour group to Europe, where they visited Italy, France, and England in the steps of famous scientists and medicos of the past. They have written a synopsis of the trip which we publish.

A long-time member of the *Journal's* Editorial Board is astronomer Nick Lomb, formerly at Sydney Observatory. At my urging he has written a history of the adoption of standard time zones. My interest in time zones was piqued after Peter Coy (Coy 2024) wrote that in 1857 William Stanley Jevons (a member of the Society) had observed a solar eclipse from Bellevue Hill (Marks 2024). Nick Lomb told me that this had occurred at 6:08 AM (Sydney Mean Time) on 26 March 1857. Nick also said that SMT was five minutes ahead of what became Eastern Australian Standard

Time on 1 February 1895. Read Nick's history below.

Our use of AI

The *Journal & Proceedings* has been using AI in the form of ChatGPT,⁶ a Large Language Model, for two years now. How? Increasingly, participants in the Forums do not provide papers based on their presentations. Instead, we must obtain transcripts of their talks, using the free YouTube to Transcript generator. Over the years, this has become much better at transcription, even of the Australian accent. (The one word that it missed consistently this time was "Canberra.")

But, although the words are well transcribed, sentences and paragraphs and speakers are not. This is where ChatGPT comes in. I manually edit the raw transcript, ending sentences with full stops, creating paragraphs, and identifying new speakers. Then I fire up ChatGPT and give it these instructions: "Edit the transcript of a speech. Eliminate the uh and um words. Use British spelling. All sentences end with a period: capitalise the initial letter of the sentence." And in a flash the final edit is completed.

At least, that's what I did a year ago in 2024. But this year ChatGPT had become smarter. Not content to do what I asked (as it had done a year ago), it identified the likely speaker and added extracts from on-line pieces by the author. Moreover, it simplified and summarised arguments and changed my fonts (using **bold** and *italic* fonts to emphasise). Too smart by half: I can see it being used by undergraduates writing essays.

I had to get quite strict with it: "I want you to copy edit the transcript of a talk. Delete ums and ahs. Use British spelling. Sentences end with period — start each

⁶ <https://chatgpt.com>

sentence with a capital letter. Do not change the voice of the speaker. Do not add content from elsewhere. Just simply edit.”

ChatGPT responded (it does this): “Here is the copy-edited version of the transcript, maintaining its conversational tone while improving clarity, grammar, and structure. Footnotes have been standardized, and key transitions or names have been clarified for ease of reading.” And later: “Here is the copy-edited transcript, following the same standards as before: improving clarity, flow, punctuation, and formatting while retaining the speaker’s voice and tone. I’ve preserved the conversational structure and made light corrections for grammar, repetition, and clarity.” Even so, the AI model did more than I’d asked for, annoyingly. What will it do next year?

This made me realise, first, how quickly AI apps/programs/models are learning and changing, if not always improving; and, second, that I want what I now realise is a brain-damaged AI model to do my final edit.

In the past I used professional transcription services (in the USA or Ireland) to do all this. But at a cost. The process with ChatGPT described above costs nothing but my time. I see on-line, however, that there are alternatives to YouTube’s free transcript generator. But experimenting reveals that they are no better: they cannot identify sentences, they do not flag a change of speaker.

So AI is making its way into our editing (and soon our writing⁷). In deriving the edited transcripts, I used AI with words, but I must mention Professor Vafae’s presentation in Panel Session 3 of the Forum, where

she demonstrated the ability of an AI model (GPT-4o⁸) to generate images, solely on verbal clues. She used this to demonstrate bias in the AI model: she is not male and not white. Read her presentation below.

Housekeeping

As always, I wish to thank Jason Antony MRSN for his assistance in producing this issue. I also thank the Editorial Board for their assistance and suggestions.

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Robert Marks, Editor
Balmain, 5 June 2025



⁷ To reassure the reader: no AI was used anywhere in this piece.

⁸ <https://chatbotapp.ai/gpt4o>