Brendan Dutton

SIGNAL

Who, what, where, why, when - a self-hosted tool for families to keep their own history true.

WHO

Brendan Dutton. Game design student, minoring in animation and VFX and industrial design. A home-server enthusiast who'd rather build something people can run themselves than something that depends on someone else's cloud.

This trimester I transcribed and rebuilt a full digital archive of my great grandfather Norman Henry Jones's WW2 POW diary, entirely by hand, page by page. That process is the seed of this project.

WHERE

Positioned inside Wellington's small civic-tech and digital-heritage design scene (National Library and Archives NZ both run active digitisation programmes), but designed to run anywhere: on a laptop, a home server, or a small NAS box, not inside a company's cloud.

NZ design salaries ground this in a real career path, not just a speculative fantasy: entry-level graphic/UX roles typically start around $50k–60k, rising past $100k with experience, concentrated mostly in Wellington and Auckland. The expansion to Melbourne Australia is also on the table after some time

WHAT

SIGNAL is a self-hosted web tool that helps a family transcribe, timeline, and safely share their own primary sources - diaries, letters, photographs - using AI to do the slow work of reading old handwriting and organising dates, while a human stays in charge of what actually gets called true.

Every AI-assisted line is tagged as a draft until a person confirms it. Nothing is published as fact until someone who cares about the story has checked it.

WHEN

Now → extend the transcription and timeline workflow already built for Norman's diary into a reusable tool, tested on a second family's material by the end of the trimester. Beyond graduation: a possible small open-source release, or a self-hosted product in its own right.

WHY

Two things converged. First, building Norman's timeline showed me how much of this work is still entirely manual - hard to read handwriting, uncertain dates, scattered photographs, and how much AI could genuinely help with that, carefully.

Second, a precedent that both inspires and warns me: Jonathan Harris's Cowbird (2011–2017), a beautiful, ad-free platform built to be "a public library of human experience."

> **"They are containers for wisdom and lifeboats for memory, helping us not to forget, and then later, not to be forgotten."**

Cowbird closed anyway, not from lack of love, but because even good intentions drift toward attention-economy pressure without structural safeguards. That's exactly why SIGNAL is self-hosted and ad-free by design, not just by stated value.

HOW SIGNAL ACTUALLY WORKS

