

ARCHIVE FORUM PAPER A series #1

A TIME FOR REVIEW

This initial paper briefly surveys some key strategic and developmental issues facing Australia's national audiovisual archive, established in 1984 as the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) and presently called ScreenSound Australia.¹

1 Audiovisual archives – the concept

Throughout the 20th century, the traditional heritage “collecting” institutions have been increasingly complemented by the newer concept of what is internationally termed the *audiovisual archive*. Such archives preserve, and make permanently accessible, historical records and aesthetic works of significance created in the audiovisual media: film, television, radio, recorded sound and their derivatives. The field has developed its own philosophy, standards, skills and intellectual disciplines, as well as its own professional qualifications for practitioners.

National audiovisual archives are analogous to national libraries, archives and museums, helping us to analyse and understand the impact of the audiovisual media on society, and more broadly to understand our past. The NFSA was in fact a conceptual pioneer in embracing the whole moving image and recorded sound spectrum in a single institution. Its creation was a major cultural statement, acknowledging the status of the screen and sound media alongside older forms of heritage.

2 History

The Archive originated in 1935 with the National Historical Film and Speaking Record Library, a subset of the then Commonwealth National Library, subsequently evolving through various forms within the National Library of Australia. From the early 1970s onward, growing community interest and bipartisan political support, together with advocacy from academic, industry and other sources, ultimately prompted the government to hive off the NFSA as a new body in its own building.

Backed by bipartisan support, its creation was announced in Parliament on 5 April 1984 by Arts Minister Barry Cohen: “The Government has decided that there is a need for a separate institution with a charter of its own”. The relevant Cabinet decision provided, among other things, for an “autonomous NFSA” reporting to the Minister, for the transfer of collection material from the National Library, and for the setting up of a special Committee to prepare a development plan for the NFSA. Entitled *Time in our Hands*, the plan created by the Committee chaired by Joan Long was tabled in November 1985. While many parts of its vision have been achieved, the absence of recommended statutory authority legislation, and other unfinished tasks, has seriously hindered its full realisation.

¹ Hereafter referred to, for convenience, as The Archive.

3 Legislation and governance

Government directed the Committee to recommend required legislation, and it proposed that NFSA become a statutory authority on the model of most other national collecting institutions, such as the National Museum of Australia, National Library of Australia, National Archives of Australia, National Gallery of Australia, Australian National Maritime Museum, Australian War Memorial. Contemporary documents confirm that this view matched government intentions. Drafting of a bill began, but extraneous circumstances over succeeding years delayed its introduction until it slipped off the agenda altogether. What was intended as a short, transitional stay in the bureaucracy acquired a de facto permanency.

All the other Commonwealth collecting institutions have enabling Acts which define their collection acquisition and other powers, mandates, responsibilities and professional character, as well as their governance arrangements and accountability to Parliament, and provide public assurance of the continuity and reliability of these institutions. Some of them operate under the *Commonwealth Authorities and Companies (CAC) Act*, which imposes more rigorous standards of accountability than the general requirements of the *Public Service Act*.

The Archive, however, remained part of what is currently called the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) – reporting not to the Minister but to the Departmental Secretary. Not being a legal entity, it could neither contract, sue or be sued in its own right, nor, in law, have independent control of its own collections. Lacking legislation, it still awaited a formal charter (a draft was recommended in *Time in our hands*) to define its character, functions, values and mandate. To the credit of its staff over the years, it has nevertheless been able to project, by its name and by convention, the same aura and status as the other national collecting institutions and to build an impressive collection.. Yet it has been an increasingly anomalous situation for such a major public archive to continue without the formal structure, accountability and protections appropriate for its optimal development.

On 13 May 2003, in the context of the Federal Budget, it was announced that the Archive would be integrated with the Australian Film Commission (AFC), that legislation would be introduced to facilitate this integration and to recognise in Commonwealth statute the work of collecting and preserving the nation's sound and visual heritage. It is understood that the Archive will continue to maintain its separate identity, and that effective 1 July 2003 responsibility for the Archive will transfer from DCITA to the AFC. The details of this arrangement are to be worked out over the coming weeks and months.

4 Charter and mission

Like other parts of *Time in our hands* the Charter arose from careful analysis, consultation and the consideration of international reference points. Had it been promptly enshrined in legislation at the time it would today be actively guiding the functioning and corporate culture of The Archive. The following excerpts are indicative:

- *As a trustee of part of the national heritage the Archive has a specific contribution to make to the quality of life and the development of the national consciousness, permitting the values, events and achievements of the past to influence the future.*

- *By its nature the Archive has a special relationship with the screen and sound industries, whose output and history it preserves and embodies. It shall work to merit their support and trust, and to complement, aid and stimulate their creative activity....*
- *.....to promote appreciation, interpretation and articulation of the relevance of the heritage to our society and national character, and to extend the boundaries of archival expertise, the Archive will encourage and undertake research, and creative and entrepreneurial activity.*
- *As a publicly.... accountable body the Archive...will base its activities on published policies on which discussion will always be welcome. It will articulate and defend its own professional integrity, independence and judgement.*

Such precepts and values are permanently valid. The Archive today needs an updated charter and mission statement to guide it, founded on the Charter recommended in *Time in our hands* and taking into account the insights of subsequent reviews of the institution.

5 Intellectual ambience

It is a recognised principle that collecting institutions not only provide for the physical preservation and good management of their holdings, but also serve as repositories of professional skills, values, subject knowledge and expertise – sometimes highly specialised. Such an intellectual environment, with its rigour and vitality, marks the difference between an institution and an inventory, between preserving and simple copying, between contextualised access and mere retrieval. Research, scholarship, soundly based and articulated policies, and public education depend heavily on the richness of this environment.

Maintaining a healthy intellectual ambience under, for example, the pressure of raising revenue or processing backlogs, can be difficult. Yet ambience and routine intersect. An intellectually vibrant institution will make better-informed processing decisions, perhaps often more efficient processing decisions.

There have been concerns that its inadequate formal structure has put strains on The Archive's intellectual ambience. The picture is complex. Despite the best efforts of conscientious and capable staff, there are perceptions of diminishing staff knowledge, and concerns about the departure of key staff and loss of corporate memory, the distance between staff and stakeholders, the disposal of 'international' material in public market-days in Canberra. Some Archive publications concentrate on publicity and sales promotions rather than the probing, the in-depth, the scholarly that is expected of an archive. In the context of the new arrangement, Archive staff known for their individual scholarly and professional reputations should be able to address these concerns and identify opportunities to consolidate the Archive's reputation. Archive Forum hopes to stimulate in the Archive's constituency a favourable climate for this to happen.

6 Consultation and isolation

Essential to the progress and intellectual life of collecting institutions are the professional associations – for example the Australian Library and Information Association, the Australian Society of Archivists and Museums Australia (the professional bodies for the library, general archives and museum sectors). They debate issues, ensure consultation, make strategic connections, watch over standards of professional training and accreditation, lobby governments and funding authorities and make independent public comment when it is needed. They are national bodies affiliated to international forums.

In Australia the audiovisual archiving profession has not been a central priority for existing associations, and neither old enough nor large enough to create its own body at the national level. Its international forums are remote from the local scene. Traditionally the field has had only one major employer – the NFSA. Managing this exposure and isolation has always been difficult. At crucial times it has been necessary for other professional groups – from academia, the screen and sound industries or elsewhere – to “go in to bat” for the Archive and be its sounding board. Good stakeholder consultation and working relationships have always been vital to this.

7 Identity

A recent and symbolic illustration of the risks inherent in The Archive’s past situation was the surprise mid-1999 name change - from the normative and self-explanatory *National Film and Sound Archive* to *ScreenSound Australia* as the de facto public identity. (It is complemented by a formal title, presently *National Screen and Sound Archive*, though this is rarely used in its own right, nor its status made clear). Adopting the name *ScreenSound* seems to have arisen from a marketing-oriented “re-positioning” rather than policy development around The Archive’s intellectual contribution to Australian culture. When used without the formal title, it masks the nature and status of the institution.

There is mounting evidence that *ScreenSound* is a counter-productive public identity for The Archive. Its adoption does not take advantage of the advice and support of The Archive’s constituency. Among the professional values which were part of the Archive’s founding vision were high credibility, inspiring the trust of its constituents, and a culture of inclusiveness which makes it *their* Archive.

8 Conclusion

Archive Forum has been formed out of anxiety for the health, good governance and professional autonomy of a vulnerable national institution yet to achieve its full founding vision. Constituents have always had a heavy stake in the The Archive and wish to be consulted and fully informed about major issues – like those above - affecting its character, its future and its relationship to them.

Accordingly, the Forum welcomes the promise inherent in the new link with the AFC, as a practical step giving the Archive a statutory basis while retaining its own institutional identity. It looks forward to participating in the discussions on the new arrangements and to stimulating awareness and debate. *Archive Forum* will further explore pertinent issues in future discussion papers. It will ‘go in to bat’ for The Archive, its staff and stakeholders in the hope that when it celebrates its 20th anniversary next year its future will be secure.

*This discussion paper was published on 17 May 2003 and represents an official stance of **Archive Forum**. It may be downloaded from its website at www.afiresearch.rmit.edu.au/archiveforum/ and may be reproduced and quoted with acknowledgement. Feedback and discussion is welcome.*