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Paper Title Audiovisual Archiving in the Transitional Period
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Abstract

The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA) is the premier cultural institution responsible for Australia's national audiovisual, documentation and artefact collection. From the first film images and sounds recorded in Australia, right through to the most recent high-profile productions, the national audiovisual collection consists of more than 1.9 million items and spans over 100 years of creative production reflecting Australia's rich cultural diversity, creativity, history and identity.

Both nationally and abroad, the NFSA is an acknowledged leader in audiovisual curatorship, preservation, research and presentation of Australia's screen and sound culture. Its reputation for excellence in the international arena of audiovisual archiving is well established through our ongoing professional commitment and active involvement in all facets of film, sound and archiving culture. From its foundation in 1984 through to becoming an independent statutory authority in 2008, the NFSA transformed as it witnessed significant changes in audiovisual archiving.

This paper will address the new challenges that have arisen in the 21st century mediascape, and the increased expectation for universal availability of audiovisual heritage. In addition to these new developments, audiovisual archives around the world are still struggling with familiar issues - some of these challenges include the obsolescence of formats and of technology; intellectual property and copyright issues; a lack of statutory authority, including the issue of Legal Deposit and the digital divide. Despite these challenges, the audiovisual archives can contribute to humanity's knowledge about our recent history – the audiovisual age – is to provide reliable evidence and educated conclusions regarding the cultural consciousness that informed the creation, dissemination and the use of the artefacts we preserve.

Paper

On October 27, 1980, moving images were declared part of the world's intangible heritage, and legal, administrative and technical measures were recommended to the United Nation's member states to prevent their loss, and to warrant their safeguarding and preservation. 1994 saw the publication of Ray Edmondson's groundbreaking study *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles*¹.

At the launch of UNSECO's Memory of the World Register² in 1997 audio recordings were among the first documents to be enlisted. It was only in 2005 that a documentary film, *The Battle of the Somme* (Geoffrey H. Mailins and John B. McDowell, United Kingdom 1916) was registered; Australia made the first feature-film contribution to the register in 2007, introducing *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Charles Tait, Australia 1906), 101 years after its release.

94 years after the establishment of the world's first film archive a movement seems has become an acknowledged profession: associations like:

- CCAA (Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archive Associations)
- IASA (International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives)
- FIAF (*Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film*)
- FIAT (*Fédération Internationale des Archives de Télévision*)

have trouble keeping track of their member agencies. While in the 1990s only two postgraduate courses in audiovisual archiving were offered world-wide today's students can choose from a multitude of master courses – in Australia, Europe and the United States, I must add.

Furthermore, the 21st century mediascape – digital television, YouTube, Facebook – and the ubiquity of 'i-devices' in the developed world's urban streetscapes reinforces the notion of a universal availability of the audiovisual heritage. Recorded sound and the moving image, once confined to privileged spaces like the cinema or the well-equipped, audiophile home, can be accessed and appreciated on-the-go; time-shifting and iView have liberated broadcast from its regime of real-time consumption.

Audiovisual works and records have left the clunky shell of their physical carriers behind and live eternally and in the celestial jukebox of the cloud. The cumbersome process of searching has been superseded by the act of comfortable browsing. Cultural heritage can be gathered effortlessly, consumed casually, and disposed of easily.

¹ Edmondson, Ray 2004, *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles*. UNESCO , Paris.
see: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001364/136477e.pdf>

² <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/>

Between 2005 and 2008 I contributed to a book called *Film Curatorship*³, a volume which documents the struggle of 4 archivists and curators (including former NFSA director Paolo Cherchi Usai) to define where audiovisual archives – in particular film archives – sit at this intersection of disruptive technological innovation. During the 2-and-a-half years of work on our book *YouTube*, a small start-up with a wonky business plan became a global phenomenon and – for a wide demographic – synonymous with audiovisual memory.

In 2004 I had a hard time finding – in a room full of film and video archivists at a seminar – another person who was aware of *archive.org*⁴ and Rick Prelinger's *Moving Image Archive*⁵ on the web. In 2011 it is hard to identify a major audiovisual archive that doesn't operate its own *YouTube* channel (including the NFSA). While I fully subscribe to the joyful and knowledge-enriching aspect of engaging with audiovisual heritage – and more about that later! – I'll put my sceptic's hat on for a minute and return to the emphasis on urgency permeating the UNESCO declaration.

Despite the notion – reinforced both by the creative industries and by governments world-wide – that audiovisual media are paradigmatic for understanding processes of convergence in a digital communications environment – our audiovisual heritage is neither universally available nor preserved in its entirety. Issues identified by Ray Edmondson and the '1994 Philosophy Working Group' are still valid 17 years later: obsolescence of formats and of technology; Intellectual property and copyright issues; a lack of statutory authority, including the issue of legal deposit; the 'Digital Divide' and the uncertainties of digitisation and digital long-term storage of moving image works; last but not least insufficient resources to deal with the above.

In many regards these issues have been aggravated over the last decade. The proliferation of digital technologies in the production chain as well as in the distribution of audiovisual works has contributed to the issue of obsolescence: as legacy formats such as analogue film and magnetic tape are discontinued raw stock, the technology to retrieve contents from obsolete carriers and the knowledge to handle them become scarce.

A digital economy has introduced even greater legal uncertainties, and technological measures to protect copyrighted content seriously affect collection development. Preservation of born-digital works still is more of a catch-phrase than a reality while we – the audiovisual archival community in general – lack policies, best practices and the infrastructures to deal with the 'Digital Deluge'.

Ironically the move towards digital production workflows contributes to what you might call an 'Analogue Avalanche' as agencies dispose of large amounts of analogue materials which are considered a liability (I say ironically because the very same agencies have held on to them for decades now considering them as valuable assets in the market place).

³ *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace*. edited by Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath and Michael Loebenstein. FilmmuseumSynemaPublikationen vol. 9, Vienna, 2008.

⁴ Internet Archive: <http://archive.org/>

⁵ see also: www.pelenger.com

Last but not least the *global financial crisis* has, to a certain degree, affected our resourcing, from austerity plans to efficiency-increasing measures implemented throughout the world. And I am not even talking about seriously disadvantaged nations that lack the most basic infrastructure to safeguard their national heritage.

We live in a transitional period indeed, and it's not just a technological transition from analogue to digital. Technologies are here to serve us. Digital technologies greatly facilitate access to collections, and a digitally-literate 'C' generation – eager to control content, to create, and to connect in a converged environment – is out there as potential audiences to appreciate and appropriate our holdings.

We are, however, not yet there. While traditional pathways of outreach and stakeholder interaction are under threat – an example being the traditional community cinemas and film societies throughout Europe and the US, who suffer from the breakdown of traditional, analogue film distribution models – the new, digital pathways 2.0 haven't been explored to their full potential yet.

There's a tendency among our community – and certainly in administrations around the developed world – to consider 'Archive' as an old-fashioned and "unsexy" term – a place where audiovisual documents die; dusty shelves, behind closed gates.

Furthermore the audiovisual archiving community is often accused of elitism, and romantic attachment to the artefact and to curatorial judgement instead of sharing their treasures with a wider public. In trying to catch up with the marketplace and the perceived demand established workflows are undermined; change the policies if new technology is not in line with your policy' is an advice often heard when the call for full-scale digitisation goes out.

I wonder: is the utopian notion of new and challenging audiences – the new people of an 'archive of the future' born out insecurity? The flipside to the concept of a 'Generation C' might just be a culture of consumption that considers audiovisual documents as a commodity, a recreational offer among others, a storehouse of 'stuff', of curiosities readily available for ingest. Don't get me wrong – I love YouTube as a treasure trove of curiosities, a chaotic and random space to dip in and out of. But I would never mistake it for an archive. Nor do I believe we should emulate it. We can't anyway. The tidal wave of crowd-sourced content dwarfs the limited number of contributions we can afford to make.

Before this sounds too morbid let me acknowledge the bright sides of this transitional period. Most of the collections of audiovisual archives like the NFSA – collections that include recorded sound, film, broadcast, as well as documentation – are preserved in their original analogue formats. In a world in which digital access will be the default and in which there is an expectation that information is searchable and available freely online this might be considered an obstacle to access to cultural heritage.

While true in some regard the argument is polemical. While digitisation of audiovisual works has been identified as one of the archival community's priorities – and the NFSA has implemented digital preservation workflows for a range of formats in its collection – safeguarding collections according to established international standards and best practices still implies placing particular emphasis on the original objects, their physical carriers, the technologies involved in producing and distributing the content, and the cultural practices associated with their use.

As the steward of sound and vision it is our duty to not only provide content for today's and tomorrow's audiences but to act as a source of authentic information. This includes strengthening our leadership position as competence centres and as knowledge base for the preservation and study of legacy technologies of audiovisual production and appreciation.

We are stewards not only of the content preserved on celluloid film, lacquer discs, wax cylinders or videotape. What audiovisual archives can contribute to mankind's knowledge about our recent history – the audiovisual age – is to provide reliable evidence and educated conclusions regarding the cultural consciousness that informed the creation, dissemination and the use of the artefacts we preserve.

Audiovisual documents are memory banks of forgotten or overlooked cultural practices. They contain not only factual data (their picture content) – moreover they are, in the words of the American philosopher Davis Baird – *knowledge-bearing objects*, expressing cultural knowledge and stimulating a critical and exploratory look at technology, knowledge, history and society.

Audiovisual archives offer archaeological insight into the past of human societies, their imaginary and their dreams through the study of their material remains. It's the unique quality of audiovisual media that distinguishes our field of study from other archival disciplines – their uncanny ability of recorded sound and the moving image to reproduce and transform reality, the interplay between fact and fiction, lifelikeness and artifice that creates engagement.

Audiovisual archives offer experiences, not just records. We are cultural producers, facilitating negotiations between the present and the past through informed study of material culture.

Maybe that's the chance this transitional period really offers: to review the potential of our collections for a study of the past; to explore connection points – in the physical world as well as in the digital realm – to share our expertise and the joys of discovery and appropriation with communities in Australia as well as overseas.

The strength of audiovisual archives lies in their capacity – and this is where the strength of our collection policies really shows – to select, to contextualise, and to share knowledge.

This transitional period may offer us a chance to do what we do best, but even better:

- **Select** – We don't need to collect everything.
- **Share** – train individuals and communities to safeguard their collections (in Australia and overseas – work done by our preservation branch in SE Asia and Africa).
- **Empower** – embrace diversity and repatriate materials. Encourage appropriation – it will benefit the owners and enhance our knowledge.
- **Challenge** – Offer compelling and engaging cultural programs and inform public debate.
- **Play** – encourage re-use and the creation of new works.