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Paper Title Curatorship and Stewardship: a match made in audiovisual
archiving heaven

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Abstract

Audiovisual archiving continuously challenges or extends existing practices in cultural institutions. As collections grow, absorbing the changing balance between traditional analogue, paper –based, photographic and audiovisual formats to a vast range of digital media, new approaches are needed to support collection development, interpretation, presentation and access to these creative works.

This paper will discuss the journey undertaken by the NFSA in managing and presenting its collections, the formal introduction of curatorship in 2004, followed by stewardship in 2009 and illustrate the vital role that both curatorship and stewardship play – as disciplines, in meeting the challenges of audiovisual archiving.

Paper

We might assume that audiovisual archiving heaven will be a perfect place, where staff have a deep knowledge of and ability to communicate about the collections, each item is fully preserved and catalogued with rich content descriptions, storage is never an issue and the public can access the entire collection online. For the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA)¹ we seek that ideal through the harmonious state of professional practice between curatorship and stewardship. Since 1984, NFSA has steadily moved toward creating an environment, where the art of curatorship and the science of stewardship combine to care for original works and bring the national audiovisual collection to audiences, worldwide.

The origin of the national audiovisual collection dates back to 1935 with the formation of the *National Historical Film and Speaking Record Library*. The 1960s and 70s saw that the film and later the sound archive sections of the National Library of Australia² emerged with a gradual evolving mission to collect and preserve the nation's film and sound heritage. By the 1980s, the need to manage manually controlled collections of film and sound recordings and substantially unsorted backlogs became critical. In 1984, the NFSA was established and the manner in which the collection was managed changed significantly.

¹ National Film and Sound Archive of Australia: <http://www.nfsa.gov.au/>

² National Library of Australia: <http://www.nla.gov.au/>

The move from manual to computer-based systems began in the 1980s and signalled the beginning of customised collection management systems to support audiovisual archiving and its processes. Early in-house databases for film and sound included FLICS³ and SONICS⁴. Disparate systems were merged to form AIMS⁵ and in 1991, MAVIS⁶ was introduced - a purpose built, integrated system to support all forms of audiovisual works - and served the NFSA for the next 20 years.

MAVIS was adopted by other major audiovisual collection including the Library of Congress⁷, the American Motion Picture Academy of Science⁸, and the National Library of Norway⁹. In 2011 the NFSA implemented a new collection management system, Mediaflex¹⁰, to ensure audiovisual archiving needs in the digital environment are fully served.

In 2004, Curatorship was formally introduced into the operational structure of the NFSA and Senior Curators were appointed across Film, Sound, Documents and Artefacts and Indigenous collections. A few years later, the NFSA became an independent statutory authority and the National Film and Sound Archive Act 2008 (NFSA Act)¹¹ provides a clear statement of the NFSA's primary functions¹² towards the national audiovisual collection and the Australian public:

- (1) The functions of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia are to:
 - (a) develop, preserve, maintain, promote and provide access to a national collection of programs and related material; and
 - (b) support and promote the collection by others of programs and related material in Australia; and
 - (c) support, promote or engage in:
 - (i) the preservation and maintenance of programs and related material that are not in the national collection; and
 - (ii) the provision of access to programs and related material that are not in the national collection; and
 - (d) support and promote greater understanding and awareness in Australia of programs; and
 - (e) undertake any other function conferred on it by any other law of the Commonwealth.

³ FLICS: Film Location and Information Control System

⁴ SONICS: Sound ON-line Information Control System

⁵ AIMS: Archive Information Management System

⁶ MAVIS: Merged Audio Visual Information System

⁷ Library of Congress - The Packard Campus of the National Audio-Visual Conservation Center: <http://www.loc.gov/avconservation/packard/>

⁸ American Motion Picture Academy of Science: <http://www.oscars.org/about/index.html>

⁹ National Library of Norway: <http://www.nb.no/english>

¹⁰ Transmedia Dynamics: <http://www.tmd.tv/>

¹¹ National Film and Sound Archive of Australia Act 2008: <http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2012C00219>

¹² s6(1-5), NFSA Act, 2008.

2) The ways in which the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia may provide support as mentioned in subsection (1) include (but are not limited to) doing any of the following:

(a) providing financial assistance (whether by way of loan, grant, investment or otherwise and whether on commercial terms or otherwise);

(b) commissioning or sponsoring programs or other activities;

(c) providing services, facilities, programs or equipment;

but does not include providing guarantees.

(3) In performing its functions, the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia is, as far as practical, to:

(a) place an emphasis on the historical and cultural significance of programs and related material; and

(b) use every endeavour to make the most advantageous use of the national collection in the national interest; and

(c) apply the highest curatorial standards; and

(d) promote the efficient, effective and ethical use of public resources.

National Film and Sound Archive of Australia may charge fees

(4) The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia may charge fees for things done in performing its functions.

National Film and Sound Archive of Australia may cooperate with others

(5) The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia may perform its functions alone or together with other persons.

By 2009, Collection Stewardship was formally introduced in the NFSA to complete these principles and to acknowledge how the NFSA had undertaken its collection management practices. Whilst from an operational perspective, it brought together key collection management areas, it also articulated the NFSA's fundamental commitment to curators and stewards working more closely together, in the best interests of the national collection.

Audiovisual production encompasses a range of material from highly commercial blockbuster films, live broadcast transmissions and platinum records to amateur home movies and recordings. Dating from the late 19th century to the present day, the national audiovisual collection contains approximately 1.9 million items, relating to film, television, radio and music production including its associated documents and artefacts.

The NFSA's collection offers an almost infinite variety of perspectives of what the national audiovisual collection and the national memory truly represent. We acquire material that represents:

- a cultural and historical record
- a record of Australian creative and technical achievement in the audiovisual context
- a reflection of the role, nature and status of audiovisual media in society.¹³

The key collecting areas of moving image, audio recordings, documents and artefacts are diverse and complex in nature. As a guide, their comparative representation in the collection, are as follows:

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| • Moving Image (includes Television) | 27% |
| • Audio Recordings (includes Radio and Oral Histories) | 20% |
| • Documents and Artefacts | 53%. ¹⁴ |

In the *NFSA Collection Policy*, 3 key principles identify the NFSA's curatorial values:

- Collecting the artefact – respect for the items and their diversity
- Handling the artefacts – respect the item's integrity
- Experiencing the artefacts – respect for the item's cultural identity.¹⁵

In curating the collection, understanding of audiovisual history, its impacts and influence in the Australian context is essential to developing and interpreting its potential. In dealing with over 100 years of creative output, the audiovisual scene needs to be understood in both retrospective and contemporary terms. The first century of audiovisual expression witnessed the development of film, radio, television and the recorded music industry. Major technical achievements and public engagement with the Internet has spurred creativity across all sectors of Australian society.

The NFSA performs its functions to the highest curatorial standards and collection activities place significant responsibility with the Curatorial branches in terms of collection content analysis, interpretation and growth. Today, the Curatorial team at the NFSA consists of 3 branches which effectively represent the full range of audiovisual production:

- Film, Documents and Artefacts
- Sound, Broadcast and New Media
- Indigenous Collections

¹³ NFSA Collection Policy, 2011: <http://nfsa.gov.au/collection/collection-policy>

¹⁴ NFSA Collection Development Strategy, 2011, p.20

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 39

The principles of a curatorial approach in this context require staff to:

- understand the national audiovisual collection at both the content and physical levels
- effectively interpret and understand existing collection strengths and weaknesses and related practical and conceptual implications
- understand the principles for preservation and storage of all formats, and to relate intimately with both the preservation and stewardship functions of the NFSA to make best use of its resources in supporting those principles.

There are clear benefits to be gained from active engagement by all curatorial staff with the collection itself. This exposure builds staff expertise to represent and interpret the collection to reach the widest audience possible and ranging from high level professional interaction to more populist engagement. Their ability to tell the story of the NFSA's collection and promote its historic value as well as its 21st century relevance underscores their fundamental assignment to ensure the collection remains culturally relevant and is a comprehensive history reflecting the diversity of the Australian experience.

Curators are also actively engaged with all other aspects of the NFSA's operations to ensure that preservation is focused on priority collection material, and that access outcomes reach their full potential. In order for Curators to undertake their work successfully, Collection Stewardship comes into the fold.

Collecting in the audiovisual scene is resource intensive and technologically demanding as all forms of audiovisual expression across digital and analogue platforms are represented in the collection. The NFSA has the responsibility to acquire, preserve and provide access to works in their original format for as long as those formats can be supported. This not only ensures that the public may continue to experience works in their original form but also allows the NFSA the unique opportunity to present heritage audiovisual material in formats that are becoming increasingly inaccessible to the public.

Clearly documented in the NFSA's Guiding Principles is the commitment to Stewardship as an organisational value: we collect, care, preserve, manage and interpret the collection to the *highest curatorial standards*¹⁶. From this statement it can determine that Stewardship:

- reflects NFSA core functions as an organisation
- is a collective responsibility
- speaks to the duty of care toward the national collection
- and is all about the Collection

Whilst these responsibilities are not unfamiliar to the NFSA, the formation of the Collection Stewardship team demonstrates the NFSA's commitment to carrying out its fiduciary duty and meeting its legal, ethical and professional responsibilities. To this end, Stewardship can be defined as, ensuring the future accessibility of the national audiovisual collection, entrusted to the care of the NFSA on behalf of the Australian public, through responsible management, policies and practices.

¹⁶ NFSA Guiding Principles, May 2011

Collection Stewardship is a shared and collective responsibility. Caring for the national audiovisual collection is of the utmost importance for the NFSA to achieve its strategic objectives, meet government expectations and to cement the public's trust in our ability to efficiently meet their expectations with sustainable and responsible collection management practices that can withstand audit and peer review.

In 2009, the Collection Stewardship branch formed and with the NFSA Collection Policy at the heart of its operational focus, the Branch centres on collection services, support and systems – thereby becoming a supportive bridge for acquisition, preservation and access programs.

In undertaking its stewardship responsibilities, two fundamental questions in audiovisual archiving collection management are addressed:

- What is entrusted to the NFSA's care?, and
- What is involved in providing that care?

Collection Stewardship is entrusted with the care of the entire national audiovisual collection both analogue and digital, all categories across all sites. A culturally significant, highly diverse collection of 1.7 million items captured in over 50 format families housed across a number of locations. The collection is predicted to reach 2 million items by 2021- growing at an estimated rate of c.300, 000 items every 7 years.

Stewardship understands the specific needs of the audiovisual collection to ensure its accessibility into the future. Drawing from a range of professional practices of other collecting institutions, Stewardship tailors its collection management systems and protocols to best suit the nature of the collection.

In accordance with curatorial priorities, staff accession newly acquired collection works across all formats and package items in accordance with archival standards in preparation for storage. Collection works are stored securely in the appropriate conditions that meet international standards for temperature and humidity levels. Environmental monitoring across all sites is undertaken making certain that storage conditions are consistently achieved.

Providing the safe transportation of collection works, for preservation, access and exhibition entails a convoy of purpose made trolleys and trucks that enables the movement of collection works. Collection audits are undertaken on two fronts: firstly to ensure items are in place and secondly to ensure the state of the collection is assessed on a regular basis. Assessments of this nature assist Curators in developing their preservation priorities by bring forth a holistic awareness of the condition of the collection.

The role of Collection Stewardship is carried out within the context of a framework that includes the protocols, guidelines and procedures that draw on established collection management practices. This suite of information needs to be managed and kept up to date to ensure that core collection documentation is in place and for staff to put into practice.

NFSA's collection care and management procedures need be measured in terms of best practice standards partnered with risk management strategies. Collection Stewardship works across the organisation to document an entire series of procedures; starting with:

- the appropriate storage, environmental conditions and monitoring regimes needed for the collection
- implementing quarantine and pest management strategies
- disaster awareness and recovery plans
- the safe transportation and the ongoing collection handling training for staff and clients alike.
- Ensuring that our metadata, accessioning standards and procedures are aligned to data quality management principles.
- Exhibition protocols for collection material for both internal and external application.
- Provision of research access and facilities for viewing collection works with particular attention needed in regards to culturally sensitive material, so that researchers can engage with the collection in a professional environment befitting of the NFSA.

Safeguarding the collection is a Stewardship responsibility; in particular the most highly significant and iconic works in the collection. This serves as a prime curatorial reference resource which can also be used in disaster recovery, for heritage asset valuation, preservation prioritisation and storage management.

The NFSA experienced significant operational and cultural changes when Curatorship and Stewardship were introduced. NFSA Staff needed time to adjust to working in a consistently curatorial manner and were further challenged with a more formalised stewardship role being established. In the past 3 years, a refreshed balance of roles and responsibilities has been found based on an approach that fosters hearty debate, respect for expertise and joint commitment to serving the collection best.

This year, the NFSA introduced a new business model and the once separate Curatorial and Stewardship teams have now united to cement the relationship and become the integrated exemplar needed to support future audiovisual archiving needs.

Having presented an overall picture of how the NFSA has reached its current state - the facts and the context to how the organisation sees itself operating in today's cultural, archival and collecting environment, we now turn to the less tangible but equally important human picture of the relationships which have been or are being forged between the 'curator/creators' and the 'steward/carers'.

These terms are applied in parallel because they illustrate aspects of the very basic relationship dynamic which will be familiar to many working in the archiving field. As previously flagged, the NFSA is working on building and maintaining a harmonious balance between the essential practical skills of the archival collection management responsibilities and the, equally fundamental skills of the curated collection builders. This often requires healthy debate and sometimes a figurative 'knocking of the heads'. Other terms might be 'fabulous' and 'fraught', as this relationship ebbs and flows.

For the NFSA, there is constant, dynamic and sometimes volatile debate when faced with the next truckload of donated analogue film, videotape or recordings all of which may represent the best quality, closest to first generation components of highly significant works. Curators can confidently recognise the value of the physical items as well as their content. Stewards are faced with the endless questions regarding that physical content- where do we put it and how many copies do we really need?

2012 is a critical time to be dealing with this tension with digital production and preservation/migration options swamping the analogue past. However, that analogue heritage still requires massive curatorial as well as physical attention as it continues to be used in audiovisual production.

The NFSA deals with wonderful opportunities as even more of the 20th century's audiovisual output reveals itself through its progressive placement with archives for safekeeping, as well as facing the apparently infinite, equally massive and certainly less stable digital formats which drive creative production today. It continues to face the familiar storage and environmental challenges for film, records, tape, as well as paper and ephemera, whilst managing a whole new world of digital demands on collection management and delivery practices. The natural progression for digital collection management includes addressing sustainable digital storage capacities; digital preservation strategies; metadata harvesting and content delivery.

No wonder tensions arise! As long-established Curators and Stewards in this specific environment, we the authors can call on many case study examples to illustrate the point. Here is an examples which highlights the needs for shared understanding and most of all, professional flexibility:

The NFSA regularly intakes substantial film collections ranging from highly prized original production components (master negatives, intermediates etc) to beaten up prints which may be the only remaining record of a particular work. Systems exist to support curatorial selection assessment, collection receipting and management of this rate of intake. With the current operations in place and the assurance that large consignments will always be flagged early for our collection stewards to prepare space, these systems work well.

Increasingly this traditional path relates to retrospective collections- works produced on film up to the present day. Today the NFSA may receive the digital equivalents for contemporary works as well as / or instead of traditional film components¹⁷. In this example, the offer relates to a huge collection of film components; substantial digital files and notable production costume, props and research papers. The curator's eye confirms that it all adds up to an extraordinary resource but the steward's eye sees that immediate need for order and control!

Finally, there is an additional imperative of urgency as the donor is facing eviction!

¹⁷ many of which are detailed in, *The Digital Dilemma 2, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 2011*: <http://www.oscars.org/science-technology/council/projects/digitaldilemma/index.html>

In this situation, having investigated and confirmed that the entire collection is highly relevant, often unique and of master quality, whilst massive in size, the curator connects with the collection stewards to consider the practicalities of accepting this offer.

First query from Stewards is, how do we care for it and where is it going to be stored? Pragmatic negotiations commence with the shared understanding that this process is in the best interests of the national memory and future engagement.

Plans are put in place and the promised 10 pallets of material arrive only to be confirmed now as 25 pallets. Curators commit to speedy work in clarifying the discrepancy and find that many more works have been included than originally negotiated.

Further investigation confirms that they contain additional, compatible, good quality files which should indeed be incorporated into the national collection. Stewards now work with the curators to manage the unwieldy but invaluable collection into identified, prioritised order. It becomes a high profile, fully supported part of the national audiovisual collection.

Flexibility is clearly the key to this successful outcome. It is essential from all parties and can honestly, be both exciting and sometimes difficult to manage. Some of the debates which ensue touch on the good sense of making a change from original planning, genuine concern about our systems and resources in terms of support, and perhaps a tinge of momentary panic which is always resolved. That ultimate reassurance is indeed the heaven of the relationship.

Describing the NFSA's progress in defining its curatorial role and creating the internal climate to support close cooperation between curators and stewards has obvious parallels with audiovisual archives worldwide. The NFSA has taken a particular path, and along the way, has often drawn on the experiences of our peers worldwide in making our choices, as has also been the case *vice versa*.

A key factor in the NFSA approach is the determined effort to support all staff in building a deep enough understanding of the core curatorial principles of the organisation to allow them to develop within that sphere.

The science of stewardship and the art of curatorship are not mutually exclusive but can fall prey to the, 'us and them', response if not carefully managed. Within the NFSA context, a shared awareness of this possibility has helped us to progress to the stage where there is mutual respect and still some healthy cynicism. This balances a most crucial archival relationship that must remain dynamic and flexible as audiovisual archiving continues to adapt moves in a world of constant change. A key fact in the NFSA approach is the determined effort to support all staff in building a deep enough understanding of the core curatorial principles of the organisation to allow them to continually develop and grow within that sphere. This opens up opportunity for curators and stewards to form interchangeable, intuitive archival relationship which will further benefit the organisation overall.