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experience

Authors: Sophia Sambono
Curator, Indigenous Collections
Brendan Smith
Manager, Regional Programs

Abstract

The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA) brings life to the collection through its rich suite of programs that enables individuals and communities to experience and connect to their national audiovisual collection through the myriad of stories that are captured within. The NFSA's role and responsibility to interpret and present the collection enriches the public's understanding and insight to Australian culture past and present.

Connecting people and communities to their national audiovisual collection is a key topic of this paper. By presenting the suite of programs that the NFSA currently delivers in state, regional, rural and remote areas of Australia, on a variety of platforms, it will illustrate the cultural impact it achieves in doing so.

Reflecting on the experiences of the NFSA repatriating audiovisual material to Indigenous Communities, the paper also address the role it undertakes in archival or knowledge repatriation to facilitate cultural maintenance in Indigenous communities. By doing so, it empowers Indigenous cultural custodians in the control of material containing their culture, encouraging a sense of history, instilling pride, a renewed interest in ancestors lives and in some cases even the restoration of cultural practices.

Paper

The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA) is the nation's living archive; collecting, preserving and sharing our rich audiovisual heritage. The NFSA holds over 1.9 million items. It is a living collection of films, television and radio programs, videos, audio tapes, records, compact discs, phonograph cylinders and wire recordings. It also encompasses documents and artefacts such as photographs, posters, lobby cards, publicity items, scripts, costumes, props, memorabilia, oral histories, and vintage equipment. And it is growing every day. It portrays the nation's socio-cultural, political and artistic history, identity and heritage like no other.

The NFSA is concerned with connecting people and communities across Australia with this heritage through a range of avenues; through on site exhibitions, online curatorship, our highly successful touring programs and through a range of repatriation activities. The primary focus of this presentation is to provide a brief overview of the NFSA's touring programs, including NFSA connects as well as a more in depth look at the repatriation experiences of NFSA.

The NFSA is committed to providing access to Australia's audiovisual cultural heritage and innovative learning experiences. As part of this mandate we share the collection through film festivals, school screenings, access to Indigenous films and live cabaret shows to diverse audiences of over 50,000 people a year in all states and territories of Australia. One of the key aims of these programs: NFSA's *Big Screen*, *School Screen*, *Black Screen*, *Cooee Cabaret* and *NFSA Connects*, is to share, and increase access to and awareness of the national audiovisual collection outside of Canberra and the capital cities – in regional, rural and remote communities.

Big Screen is a travelling film festival which presents new and archival Australian films to audiences across regional and rural Australia. Since 2001, *Big Screen* has visited over 100 venues across the country and is continuing to grow as Australians embrace the festival culture and celebrate our artistic diversity. *Big Screen* festival increases national awareness of Australia's audiovisual culture is committed to inspiring experiences, engaging and learning.

School Screen is one of the NFSA's learning and education programs. It provides free screenings of Australian films for school students and teachers in regional areas at their local cinemas. These screenings are coordinated and run in consultation with teachers in the local areas. The program aims to provide the experience of seeing Australian films 'on the big screen', an experience many regional and rural students traditionally miss out on. The films selected often have direct links back to particular syllabus and subject areas and are supplemented (where possible) by study guides and/or online learning materials. *School Screen* focuses, as its particular responsibility, on school students aged from early primary to high school graduates. Each year, the NFSA delivers such screenings to over 14,000 school students right round the country.

NFSA Connects is the archive's experiment into the opportunities and possibilities of video and web conferencing. *NFSA Connects* is a new program that provides regional students across Australia with unprecedented access to creative arts professionals to hear their stories and pose meaningful questions about their experiences, work and careers. The project utilises video-conferencing and other digital networking equipment available to schools in both urban and regional areas to present Q&A-style events with contemporary filmmakers and artists. *NFSA Connects* project marries an audio-visual subject with an audio-visual delivery. The method of transmission utilises the same techniques that make the subject of film so powerful, with the added distinction of taking place in real time. Students across the state who are participating in the program view the selected film or documentary in the weeks leading up to the event as part of their studies.

At the scheduled time, each group of students logs in from their video/web conferencing classroom and connects to the *NFSA Connects* event. The special guests are usually in a studio in the capital city (often hosted by the state Department of Education or a similar agency), sometimes with local students present in the studio. The guest(s) present an overview of their experience of creating the film or documentary, the processes involved and any challenges they faced. They then respond to questions from the students from various locations, responding directly to the students themselves and the questions and issues they raise. In this way, the students gain unprecedented access to these arts professionals and have their own questions answered directly by the source. Most school students would not usually get direct access to people of this calibre and ask them questions about their work, their craft, their films/music and the stories they tell. Such access is even less likely for students (and teachers) in rural and remote areas. It is likewise well received by the professionals involved, filmmaker Rachel Perkins, in particular, gave the feedback that it was great to see their work “resurrected from the archives and back in circulation.”

Cooee Cabaret was conceived in 2009 as a way to share the NFSA's sound collection with regional communities, and to tap into the new National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program (NCITO), set up to assist Canberra cultural institutions in touring their collections outside the ACT. The NFSA had a well established and acclaimed touring programs focused on film (*Big Screen*, *School Screen* and *Black Screen*) but very few touring programs showcasing the extensive sound collection.

Cooee Cabaret has been performed 26 times in 19 regional locations – in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia – as well as Canberra. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with many people welcoming the opportunity to explore and enjoy our diverse sound heritage in such an innovative way, and the chance to sing along to some favourite Aussie songs. The community sing-along aspect of the shows cannot be underestimated – there is clearly a yearning for this in regional communities, taking audiences back to the concert hall days of the 1920s and '30s.

The NFSA's *Sounds of Australia Registry* formed the basis for the project, being an existing registry representing the diversity and breadth of the NFSA's sound collection. It includes some of the best known and most loved Australian sound recordings, such as the Aeroplane Jelly and Vegemite jingles, *The Road to Gundagai*, Dad and Dave, Men at Work's *Down Under* and Slim Dusty's *Pub With No Beer*. A key element of most *Cooee Cabaret* performances was the local performers, who joined the cast onstage to perform their own compositions, local songs and poems, or interpretations from the *Sounds of Australia Registry*.

Over 40 separate local performances were part of the three-year *Cooee* experience, including actors, poets, choirs, duets and solo musicians. Many local performances were filmed and can be enjoyed on the NFSA's YouTube channel. *Cooee Cabaret* was supported and enhanced online with social media and audience development elements. These included published audio extracts and curated notes for most of the *Sounds of Australia Registry* recordings on the NFSA website and *australianscreen*, focused promotion through web and social media sites Facebook and Twitter, and blog posts during the tour.

The *Black Screen* program showcases contemporary Indigenous Australian films and makes them available to individuals and organisations for use at screening events, festivals and community celebrations through DVD compiles. The compiles include short films & documentaries by renowned Indigenous Australian filmmakers such as Warwick Thornton, Ivan Sen, Wayne Blair, Adrian Wills and Beck Cole.

This year *Black Screen* collaborated with the Indigenous Collections Team to produce its first compile of archival material to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the landmark Mabo decision. Mabo Day marks the day of the High Court's decision to strike down the legal doctrine of 'terra nullius,' effectively acknowledging the prior occupation of the land by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people before European arrival. The 1992 decision came 10 years after Eddie Mabo and four other Meriam people of the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait began action in the High Court seeking confirmation of their traditional land rights. The decision was handed down on 3 June 1992, and although Eddie Mabo and three others died before they heard the decision, the court's ruling changed the legal landscape of the nation, and paved the way for native title.

Happily many of the mainstream programs of NFSA have notable indigenous content; the Indigenous Collections team however has a full time focus and collaboration with communities regarding their representation in the national collection. As a curator of the NFSA's Indigenous collection this will be the focus on for the remainder of the presentation.

The NFSA is Australia's living archive. The concept of a living past resonates deeply with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who belong to the world's oldest living cultures. It is the foundation for a strong, ongoing collaboration between the NFSA and the first peoples of Australia. It recognises the complexity of past collection practices and the ways we continue to come to terms with them, and the significance of those collections to the cultural maintenance and revival taking place in Indigenous communities today.

Collections like those held by the NFSA are storehouses of information about family, ancestors, traditions and ways of living that may have been lost or are in the process of being rebuilt. Of the entire 1.9 million items in collection the Indigenous material equals approximately 1.5% at around 22 000 items. This material requires special attention, and the Indigenous Collections team is responsible for the culturally appropriate management of the collections, oral histories to enrich collection documentation, curatorial work interpreting and exhibiting the collection on site and online, and what we call 'knowledge repatriation' of selected collection material to Indigenous source communities, which in reality, is the provision of, primarily, digital copies - not originals, of Indigenous collection material to communities whose land, culture or people feature in that material.

The key purpose of knowledge repatriation is to maintain and contribute to cultural identity. The NFSA participates in knowledge repatriation to facilitate cultural maintenance in Indigenous communities, to empower Indigenous cultural custodians in the control of material containing their culture, encouraging a sense of history instilling pride, a renewed interest in ancestors' lives. In most recent times, particularly in Australian collecting institutions, repatriation has meant the return of human remains and secret/sacred objects from collections to Indigenous communities; back to country. There is debate about whether it is appropriate for institutions that do not

return an actual or 'real' object to call the return of copies 'repatriation'. The head of the repatriation program at the National Museum of Australia, Dr Michael Pickering, is firm in his belief repatriation is only about returning actual collection items to indigenous communities. He states that, "...to me, and to the dictionary, repatriation is the return of something and how do you define that something? ... it's the human remains and secret/sacred objects. But it is the repatriation of original somethings; it has to be the original."ⁱ

However, cultural property, according to the 1970 UNESCO convention "comprises property that on secular or religious grounds is specifically designated by a nation as being of importance for archaeology, prehistory, history, literature, art or science" and encompasses in its definition "objects of ethnological interest" and "archives, including sound, photographic and cinematographic archives"ⁱⁱ.

Ideas of repatriation should likewise be expanded to include archival works as it is still, perhaps, the best term to use as it acknowledges the processes and benefits which are aligned with object returns as well as its elevation from everyday access work performed by institutions, but it could certainly not be used without a qualifier to distinguish it from museum work or even new terms, such as specialised access or distributed national collection? As long as those who really matter in this equation, the Indigenous source communities know what it is we are talking about when we call them from across the country, and often across language barriers.

If there is to be an attempt at a suitable term or phrase for archives and libraries one must consider the content of the material being returned, ultimately it is the intangible cultural heritage contained within these works that is really being supplied to communities. Additionally if one considers the meaning of repatriation as it is used to describe the return of currency to its country of origin, repatriation is still a valid descriptor as it is *cultural* currency of the intangible cultural heritage being returned to communities. A possible term, currently being used to describe museum collection access without a transfer of ownership to source communities, is 'knowledge repatriation'. It seems to be the most appropriate in relation to the provision of archival access in source communities as the use of the word 'knowledge' implies that it is something intangible being provided to the peoples involved as well as an improved knowledge of what has been recorded of their people.

In reality audiovisual repatriation does return something significant and valuable to source communities, an opportunity to reconnect to the past and to culture, despite not returning actual ownership of collection material like the act of traditional repatriation of objects and human remains. It is the recognition of authority over the works and the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) contained within the material, the films, audio recordings and photographs, that is returned.

Curator of Ethnography at the National Museum of Denmark, Mille Gabriel asserts that to facilitate genuine repatriation of knowledge "partnerships must be formed in a spirit of reconciliation and equitable exchange and, apart from actual repatriation, can include approaches such as knowledge sharing, capacity building, co-curation and co-management of collections"ⁱⁱⁱ. In the archive environment; it can be a huge risk to community relations to proceed with even what might be called a 'digital access project' without consultation. Expert in the complexities of data management, Jane Hunter, in Martin Nakata and Marcia Langton's guide to Indigenous knowledge centres and libraries, includes consultation as a key milestone in virtual repatriation

and states that for all archival digitisation and access programs “(a)ppropriate consultative processes need to be established to identify and prioritise the material to be captured”^{iv}. Repatriation officer at the National Museum of Australia David Kaus describes it as; “... a process whereby you give the traditional custodians or community ... the control and gives them the right to make decisions about the material...”^v

NFSA has recently developed in collaboration with renowned Indigenous Intellectual Property lawyer Terri Janke Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property protocols which will facilitate, in essence, a repatriation of control over archival material; a right to decide about how it used. With these protocols in place, knowledge repatriation at NFSA will empower Indigenous cultural custodians with an awareness of the cultural representations of their people held in National collections and provide opportunities to speak for the material and stipulate conditions for the use of or access to these materials.

A major barrier to the repatriation of collections (apart from the obvious in the case of archives – copyright) are cultural restrictions, that is recordings that depict secret/sacred ceremonies or images, or for limited times - people who have passed. These *traditional cultural protocols* mean we need to exercise caution when reviewing the collection for repatriation and that we make sure it is the right people's secrets before we even show it to them let alone send out to a community. In a lot of cases the communities don't have a secure storage or viewing area for secret/sacred recordings so they chose not to have this material repatriated. They are happy to know that it exists and is safe in our archives, with the understanding that we take the storage and management of their secret/sacred material seriously. These risks can be mitigated if the process of repatriation is done well and relationships that promote collaboration are established.

Knowledge repatriation can also have a significant cultural impact; Indigenous people often utilise their repatriated collections in many cases as the only family photo album, for land management, and in the reinforcement of the significance of cultural practices through the evidenced/documentated history seen in the archive (as opposed to a restoration of cultural practice). As Dr Gordon Pullar of the University of Alaska Fairbanks points out, traditional ways were rarely entirely “lost” but rather “misplaced” and waiting to be once again brought to the fore and revitalized. He emphasizes that repatriation is playing an active part in the cultural healing that had occurred among indigenous peoples, as pride and identity are restored. Cultural heritage, for indigenous people, is more than a mere record of the past but also a vital part of revitalizing culture, renewing knowledge, skills and ceremonies^{vi}. This where the need for a new kind of repatriation emerges, he writes, the repatriation of knowledge, knowledge embedded in the objects themselves (their materiality, design and proportions) but also in the ethnographic research, photos, drawings and field notes^{vii}.

Ideally repatriation should be a reciprocal process in which visits are made by cultural custodians to the archive and staff make visits to the community organizations involved and involve an exchange not only of material but information and ideas. Several knowledge repatriation experiences with varying levels of success have offered an unparalleled learning curve and NFSA is currently in the process of developing official procedure for repatriation and cultural clearances. This is a time consuming activity. It should not be lightly undertaken.

The NFSA is a living archive. It is collecting, preserving and re-presenting portrayals of Australian identity back to the Australian people from all walks of life across the country. Not only through successful touring and outreach programs but through activities of knowledge repatriation - which all encourage their own climate of change; a devolved authority over the collection and allow our audience to dictate its own representation of identity.

ⁱ Interview with Dr Michael Pickering, October 2008

ⁱⁱ UNESCO, 1970. Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Available at: <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001140/114046e.pdf#page=130>> [Accessed September 20, 2010]

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 13.

^{iv} Hunter, J., 2005. The Role of Information Technologies in Indigenous Knowledge Management. In Nakata, M & Langton, M, *Australian Indigenous Knowledge and Libraries*, p. 95

^v Interview with David Kaus, October 2008

^{vi} Gabriel, M. & Dahl, J. eds., 2008. *UTIMUT - Past heritage - future partnerships*

Discussions on Repatriation in the 21st Century, Copenhagen: International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), p.16.

^{vii} *Ibid*, p.16.