

## **CHALLENGES TO A SMALL ETHNOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES**

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This paper is written from the viewpoint of an archivist managing sound recordings, photographs, videos and films that are about and by the Indigenous people of Australia. These documents provide the most comprehensive documentation of the culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I propose to list a number of challenges the archives is facing and to show how we are dealing with them.

A brief background on my institution will help put my comments into perspective. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was established in 1966 to research and document what was believed to be a dying race of people. The Act that constituted the Institute, while recognizing the importance of research and documentation, did not mention the archives and library. When the Act was redrafted in 1989, two major changes had already occurred; the scope of the Institute was broadened to include Torres Strait Islanders and the importance of establishing and maintaining a cultural resource collection was specifically mentioned. The archives is only part of a larger institution and must share funds with other units: the library, the research section, publications and the finance section.

As of the year 2000, I will have worked in this archives for 25 years now and seen many changes in how we have collected, preserved and disseminated our holdings. These changes have been in response to technical developments, political pressures, shifting organizational priorities and legislative changes. Technical developments include varying formats of carriers, digitization and the Internet. Political pressure comes from groups of Indigenous people who want access to

and copies of audiovisual documents, especially those that were made long ago. Shifting organizational priorities mean that we must spend more time with paperwork and the requirements of bureaucracy, especially since we have become part of the Australian Commonwealth Public Service. Such a move has meant that our small organization must comply with rules and regulations designed for much larger government agencies. Finally, legislative changes, particularly in the area of copyright, mean that we must recognize the holders of intellectual property rights of audiovisual material as well as depositors and recordists.

I would like to outline seven crucial issues that present challenges to small archives. They will be stated in terms of expectations and present realities thus showing the tensions that exist in coping with change yet maintaining present levels of service and functions. I will show how we are dealing with these issues at my institution, trying to come up with workable solutions. Most of these points will be relevant to all audiovisual archives and some will apply to archives specializing in ethnographic material.

1. Increased cuts to funding yet maintaining and expanding services.
2. Pressure to disseminate yet ensuring respect for the wishes of owners of intellectual property rights.
3. Need to add to the collection yet having fewer funds for ordering new materials.
4. Publicizing the work of the archives yet coping with increased demand and less staff.
5. Pressure for increased mobility of staff yet valuing corporate memory and knowledge of the collections.
6. Policy to employ Indigenous people yet ensuring that both they and the Institute deal with cross-cultural issues and work priorities in the best way possible.
7. Knowing about changing technical formats yet making decisions on the best overall archival solutions.

The first point has a direct bearing on the others. It is also a feature that all archives have to face at one time or another. I shall

comment on each point in the order given, demonstrating how my institution is dealing with each.

*1. Increased cuts to funding, yet maintaining and expanding services*

STAFF EXCHANGE

Earlier in this paper I had mentioned the reduction in staffing brought about by cuts in funding. If fewer staff must deal with more and varied work, then they must be trained to make the best of it. Larger archives have enough staff to allow for specialist work, such as film conservation, intensive cataloguing, etc. We have found staff exchange to be of great benefit, both in training our employees and in providing a varied work environment for the visiting employees.

One example of a most successful exchange was a programme developed between our institution and ScreenSound Australia, formerly known as the National Film and Sound Archive. For one month our audio technician worked with film conservators at ScreenSound, learning the basics of film handling and winding techniques. The next month, his trainer came to our archives and the two assessed, cleaned and prepared a number of films for telecine transfer. Salaries remained constant with each institution paying its employees. Our audio technician gained a new and much-needed skill for our archives work. Their film conservator expressed great delight in helping us to develop procedures for future film work as well as broadening her experience with ethnographic film.

TEAMS

Another strategy we have used to cope with financial cuts has been to create project teams to complete specific tasks. Schedules are drawn up and staff members have indicated their willingness to serve on a roster system.

We are doing this to prepare our archives for moving into a new building towards the end of 2000. In the area of film, we are assessing, listing, numbering, measuring and, if necessary, re-canning over 10,000 cans of film. Staff members allocate one morning or afternoon per week and work in groups of two. They enjoy wearing white coats and gloves and assume a new identity for that time each week!

Teams have also created CD-ROM compilations of interrelated photographs, sound recordings and videos.

#### GRANTS AND EXTERNAL FUNDING

There is much pressure on archives to become self-funding. Large institutions can begin to achieve this goal by creating publications based upon archival material. Although we have issued some recordings, films and videos, our publications can only contribute in a small way to the running costs of the archives.

We have been assembling lists of grant-making and other funding bodies that could make contributions towards maintaining our holdings. This exercise can require very creative thinking and knowledge of how our collections can qualify for such funding. We need to be ever aware of current events and how our collections can fit in with political areas of concern. For example, of late a lot of publicity has been given to the importance of maintaining languages as a major part of cultural identity within Australia. We have successfully applied for a large government grant recently to help us employ a linguist on a fixed term to catalogue and make finding aids for tapes of languages that are dying out.

#### THE INTERNET

The Internet can help to make some aspects of dissemination easier. For example, we are involved in a project to create discographies of published sources in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music. A draft was put on the Internet for comment and evaluation. The final version appears as a joint publication between the Institute and ScreenSound Australia and can be downloaded from the Internet at [www.screensound.gov.au](http://www.screensound.gov.au). Many requests for information about contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music can be answered by referring clients to the Internet.

Of course, the Internet often brings a particular set of problems, with which I shall be dealing with under the next heading.

#### *2. Pressure to disseminate holdings yet ensuring respect for the wishes of the owners of intellectual property rights.*

The Internet has given international publicity to our archives and

many people now want copies of our holdings. However, there may be recordings, films and photographs documenting ceremonial material with cultural restrictions. In the case of Aboriginal people, some of the material may only be seen by one gender or by people with a particular initiatory status. Also, copyright provisions may not protect the material in a way that takes cultural laws into effect, such as group ownership. My institution and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission jointly sponsored a study into collating Indigenous opinions about laws and policies that affect their cultural and intellectual property rights.

Once material is on the Internet, it is very difficult to control who gets hold of it and for what purpose. For example, photographs may be downloaded and the image may be modified into something totally different. Very few controls exist to ensure proper attribution or payment if the image is to be used in a publication.

The 1989 Act that governs our institute states that we must not disseminate material that will be offensive or harmful to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. We are working through the implications of this for dissemination. At present, we do not put our audiovisual material on our web page; only our catalogue of listings is available.

#### DEPOSIT FORMS

Deposit forms guiding conditions of access and copying are among the most important working documents for any archives. In our case, we have had a series of forms and have taken years to get the wording right. These forms give us legally binding instructions about how to handle our collections. Depositors may also choose the option of transfer of material which means that the carriers become the legal property of the Institute.

When audiovisual material is lodged at the Institute, forms must be completed informing the archives of how the Indigenous people who have rights to the intellectual content are willing to let the material be used. In any case, if material based upon the holdings of the archives is to be published, the authors must contact the Indigenous owners and negotiate conditions with them.

If there is content of a restricted nature, we need to have a pro-

cedure for clearance within the community from which it came. Alternatively, we may choose not to accept anything that has too many restrictions.

#### DECENTRALIZATION

Regional centres can ease the burden of dissemination. They get the material closer to the people who most often request copies and, in many cases, can help in cultural revitalization. We have a Community Access Program that helps Indigenous people come to our Institute, locate material from their area and obtain copies. They have helped us identify the people in photographs and videos and the voices of people on recordings. Also, when they experience the joy of, for example, seeing images of their relatives, they often think about depositing some of their own material. This leads to my next point.

#### *3. Need to add to the collection, yet having fewer funds for ordering new materials*

Limited funding focuses collection development and policy like nothing else can. My institution is fortunate to receive material from grantees who have been funded by its Research Programme, but we also seek important collections from other sources. In addition, we try to maintain a representative sample of published audiovisual material. The following strategies may prove helpful in developing collections.

#### INCENTIVES

People need to know how important their photographs, recordings, films and videos are. They also need to know that archives can preserve them for the benefit of society. Part of the work of an archives should be to get this message to others. Videos highlighting the collections and an outreach programme can bring valuable material to the archives.

The Community Access Programme mentioned above allows participants to locate material from their area and in so doing, see the value of preserving it and making it available to others. We have obtained a number of collections this way.

One Government programme that has helped many archives is the Tax Incentive for the Arts scheme. Donors wishing to leave their

collections to an approved institution may receive a major tax credit based upon the value of the material deposited.

UNIQUE MATERIAL

My institution has found that it must concentrate on collecting unique audiovisual materials. In our case, these are field recordings, videos and photographs. It would be too onerous to collect large amounts of published videos, for example, when other collecting institutions such as the National Library receive large amounts of these by legal deposit or by their collecting brief. Within Australia, institutions are working together to try to avoid needless duplication of holdings.

EXCHANGE

In this time of funding cuts, archives need to be creative in developing collections. Expertise in various subject areas can be a very tradeworthy commodity. For example, in exchange for copies of historic recordings, we have been able to provide documentation for Indigenous materials, particularly old recordings and films, for ScreenSound Australia. Also we have been able to caution them about the use of culturally restricted material such as a film of a ceremony that should only be seen by Indigenous men. Exchange of material and knowledge leads to the next point: publicity for the archives and its work.

*4. Publicizing the work of the archives, yet coping with increased demand and less staff*

I believe the key to solving this dilemma is in creating realistic policies and goals that have the support of the management.

GOALS

Archives must tailor their outreach to produce benefits for themselves and goals must be balanced with realities. This means, as in the previous points, to encourage donations of collections and to educate the general public about the value of the archives. Also, if the public face of an archives is intriguing and inspiring, then interesting people will be attracted to work there, furthering goals and giving new ideas.

CATALOGUES AND CATALOGUING SYSTEMS

The archives must be logically organized to enable the user to do most of the work in accessing the collections and all procedures must be efficient and logical.

Whether we like it or not, catalogues are in great demand on the Internet. The format must be logical and easy to use. Also, procedures for ordering copies need to be set up for client use.

In choosing a computerized cataloguing system, archives can opt for an in-house one designed for their specific needs or they may choose an 'off-the-shelf' product. We have had both types of systems in my institution. Although an in-house system can be created to give the most efficient results, it can be very expensive in its developmental phase.

Alternatively, an 'off-the-shelf' system may be more economical at first and may include most features required, but once an archives is locked into the 'culture' of such a system, upgrades may change those very features that were attractive initially. For example, my institution uses both Macintosh and PCs for workstations. The 'off-the shelf' system we purchased made a business decision to do away with its Macintosh compatibility. As a result, we had to purchase PC emulation software to run the upgrade.

PRESENTATIONS

The very nature of audiovisual collections adapts beautifully to computerized presentations on Powerpoint and other modes of presentations. It is our material that other disciplines use to make their presentations and papers vital and interesting. If we have a number of presentations about our collections to show visitors, then time spent on publicity, tours and explanations can be cut down considerably.

For example, we have created two CD-ROM projects both of which present highlights of our collections from two geographical areas of Australia. These can be used in our library with little if any explanation and can entertain for hours. Also, dedicated projects can be put on the Internet for external use.

The next point details a careful balancing act between two opposing philosophies of work ethics.

*5. Pressure for increased mobility of staff, yet valuing corporate memory and knowledge of the collections*

The Australian Public Service values mobility within its structure. Since my institution became part of the Public Service in 1989, it is now possible for our employees to apply for positions within any area of the entire Public Service. Another result of this mobility ethic has been for jobs within the institution to be advertised for fixed terms—mostly three to five years in executive management and research and shorter periods for other staff.

In contrast to this ethic, knowledge of the collections and their content is built up over a length of time for archivists. Also, a long-standing corporate knowledge can be vital in unravelling mysteries of conditions of deposit or how material arrived at the archives. Most archives hold material that is not fully documented or registered. Finally, lessons from the past help guide the creation of more efficient policies and procedures.

My institution has tried the following strategies to accommodate both of the above ethics.

CAREER STRUCTURES AND VARIETY

A number of jobs within our archives have changed drastically since they were created. As jobs have expanded into requiring more responsibilities, staff members have been able to present cases for upgrading their positions within the Public Service guidelines. This provides a strong incentive to stay but allows for mobility within the Public Service at a higher level.

CORPORATE DOCUMENTATION

Processes need to be documented to foster efficiency. To this end we are trying to show how the collections were developed and to record any special conditions that apply to them. Systematic collections started in the 1960s when the reasons for collecting were different from what they are now. Our deposit forms give much information but notes need to be written to give a fuller background to the collections themselves.

The creation of our Access Unit served as a catalyst for passing on this knowledge. Some staff of the Unit have not worked with the

archives before and we were forced to develop a plan whereby documentation would be held in one place in a logical arrangement. We realized that many facts about how collectors wished to be dealt with, and what the special features of some collections are, had been a part of our oral tradition instead of our written records. If some of us left the institution, much of this information would be lost. We have seen the need to document this corporate memory and are working towards a systematic writing-up of such information.

STAFF FROM OTHER AREAS OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Not only are we able to apply for positions within the larger Public Service but we encourage people from other government agencies to work with us. This process leads to my next point.

*6. Policy to employ Indigenous people, yet ensuring that both they and the Institute deal with cross-cultural issues and work priorities in the best way possible.*

Within my institute, we have an Indigenous Recruitment Policy. To quote from this policy:

The Institute will only be able to effectively assess and express the aspirations, rights and needs of Indigenous communities and individuals throughout Australia, if there are Indigenous staff in all areas and at all levels of the organisation.

Increasingly, the public face of the Institute is being represented by Indigenous people. The Governing Council consists mainly of Indigenous people and the last two Chief Executive Officers have been Indigenous. The focus of my institution has changed from being a research and documentation centre about Indigenous people to a research and documentation centre by and for Indigenous people. This means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are working beside Australians from other cultural backgrounds. To ensure the best possible working relationships, we are using some of the following strategies.

CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING

People of different cultural backgrounds need to understand cultural protocols. Behaviour that may be acceptable in one culture may

be offensive in another. For example, direct eye contact and speaking loudly, as Americans can be prone to do, tell an Aboriginal person that the speaker is angry with them. Staff at the institute have the opportunity to undergo cultural awareness training where historically-held attitudes are explored and role-plays enacted. As the clientele become more and more Indigenous, it is vital that communication be both sympathetic and efficient.

#### VARIED EXPERIENCE

Whenever a job falls vacant or a new position is created, our policy encourages us to fill that position with an Indigenous member of staff if possible, allowing for mobility and skills-development in the Institute. For example, in the archives, we trained an Indigenous person from another section of the Institute to do basic analog tape copying to provide listening copies. Scholarships and apprenticeships also allow for ensuring job satisfaction while the person gains qualifications.

#### EFFECTIVE CLIENT CONTACT

For the last decade or so, our major client group has been Indigenous people. Some of these users have become upset when they have requested copies of cultural material from their own areas and for one reason or another, have been denied access. Reasons may include restricted conditions of deposit; however, if a person from another cultural group is in a 'gatekeeper' position, then real distress may be caused.

To address some of these difficulties, we have created an Access Unit whose staff are mostly Indigenous. For people requesting copies of tapes, photographs or videos, the Access Unit will be their first contact point at the Institute. Indigenous people wanting access to collections often prefer to deal with another Indigenous person, someone who has an innate understanding of their needs. Indigenous staff members can be free in explaining rules and procedures, knowing that their communication is less likely to be misinterpreted by the client.

The final area of concern leads to some of the most important decisions that archivists will be called upon to make: how to arrange

for the best preservation and conservation of the collections.

*7. Knowing about changing technical formats, yet making decisions on the best overall archival solutions*

The information contained in photographs, sound recordings and films is of utmost importance. As technology advances, we can now make improved reproductions of the originals. Digitization has meant that we can now make copies without any loss of quality; however, it also means that modifications can be made more easily thus challenging the integrity of the original information.

In an ideal world, archives would make a sizeable investment each year in new computers, digitization equipment and effective web pages. Reality tells us that such a world does not exist but aspects of it can be found if we know where to look. These are some of the ways we have tried to deal with the rapidly advancing technical revolution.

RESEARCH

Changes in formats have moved at a lightning pace and we have always wanted to ensure that a central point for information on the best formats exists right within our institution. To this end, we have designated one staff member, a qualified audio engineer, to identify recent developments in conservation and preservation. Other staff who have contacts in this area pass their information to him so that there is a central point for research. Also, we are in the process of compiling a list of web bookmarks on technical issues.

CONFERENCES AND CONTACTS

We are fortunate to be located close to ScreenSound Australia whose technical research team has been most generous in sharing their knowledge with us. We also encourage attendance at technical workshops and conferences where contacts can prove as valuable as the papers presented.

DIGITIZATION

Aboriginal communities are now receiving funding for computers and audiovisual equipment. They are requesting copies of cultural material in digital form—a development that had hastened our own

digitization programme. We have begun to digitize our photographic and recorded sound collections mostly in-house, where we can maintain quality control. We have also been fortunate to have the space to keep the original carriers as well under temperature and humidity controlled conditions.

In conclusion, archivists need to be flexible without compromising on standards, creative in practical ways and yet, ever mindful of the care entrusted to us in preserving, documenting and disseminating our priceless audiovisual cultural heritage material.