

## A ScreenSound Too Far: the renaming of the National Film and Sound Archive

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### Author's note

Throughout this article I refer to the institution by the name adopted on its creation in 1984 – and its diminutives, NFSA or the Archive. Anything else would be too confusing. I am expressing my own personal and professional opinions, which do not necessarily reflect those of any organisation with which I am associated. I write strictly as an individual exercising, as best I can, my judgement of the ethics and obligations involved. In discussing events which occurred while I was employed at the NFSA, I have avoided areas of confidentiality.

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On 21 June 1999, some 500 guests assembled in Canberra to celebrate the opening, by Prime Minister John Howard, of the new building wing of the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA). First visualised in the Archive's 1985 visionary blueprint *Time in our hands*, the extension had been a long time coming, but now the headquarters was physically complete. The honours were done, the proverbial ribbon was cut. But it transpired that the main event was yet to come.

For the unwitting guests were then informed that the Archive had a new name. It was double-barrelled: a marketing title **ScreenSound Australia**, and a formal institutional name **The National Collection of Screen and Sound**. The new identity was hailed as a “move forward ... the first step in a long term effort to increase recognition of its work, and more importantly, take it successfully into the 21<sup>st</sup> century”<sup>1</sup>.

As they left, guests were given a letter from the Director thanking them “for joining us in celebrating the launch of ScreenSound Australia, the National Collection of Screen and Sound”. It declared “we are now positioned for the future” and promised:

**Part of that move forward will be a focus on strategic alliances with industry and business. A *ScreenSound Foundation* will be established later this year to foster involvement of people and businesses from all sectors of the community to support the valuable work we do. Tonight was really only the start. We have**

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<sup>1</sup> From press release, 21 June 1999

**many months of development and planning ahead to make our new name count. We will be an organisation that truly reflects our new positioning....**

Perhaps, as they departed, supporters wondered why the NFSA, having just fulfilled a foundational dream, had suddenly and inexplicably jettisoned its hard-won, well-established identity as one of Australia's major custodial institutions, to start over with such an anomalous and apparently marketing-oriented identity. Why was this needed? Was there some underlying defect or crisis? What was the Archive now being "positioned" to do? Why had the evening's occasion been redefined *after* the event as the celebration of a surprise *name change*?

The move forward soon unravelled. The ScreenSound Foundation never appeared. A confused and unsuspecting constituency, caught off balance, found little to celebrate in an identity switch so stark that that it seemed ScreenSound was meant to be perceived as a different organisation from NFSA.<sup>2</sup> Responses ranged from laughter to puzzlement, concern and disbelief:

**...the reaction from the industry could best be summed up as outrage ...[a] bland name which didn't give the vaguest hint of the Archive's core activity, not to mention the fact that the new name hid its public service role.<sup>3</sup>**

The changes appeared superficial but their effects were to be far from benign. Complaints flooded in. The *Annual Review 1999-2000*, page 14, noted that

**...out of a total of 99 complaints received, ScreenSound Australia's change of name and the relocation of its Sydney office provoked a total of 73.... Staff have worked very hard to communicate the rationale for these two changes and complaints have steadily decreased**

*but it failed to record the 'rationale' itself.* In early 2000 a survey by the newly established Friends of the National Film and Sound Archive<sup>4</sup> logged similar numbers of written complaints.

Far from being able to "take it successfully into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" and "update the organisation's image and increase its marketing potential"<sup>5</sup>, the new double identity launched on June 21 lasted barely 6 months. The formal title *National Collection of Screen and Sound* quietly disappeared, being replaced by *National Film and Sound Archive* and, in yet another change in July 2000, by *National Screen and Sound Archive*: three formal names in just over a year. As for the "increase in marketing potential", product sales - after rising steadily for years - dropped by nearly half over the same period, and have never regained pre-name-change levels<sup>6</sup>.

The inherent limitations of the *ScreenSound* formula, compared to its predecessor, quickly became clear from feedback. It suggested a commercial entity, a product, a

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<sup>2</sup> New name, corporate colours and logo with no backward reference to NFSA or its predecessors.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Galvin in *if Magazine*, July 2000, page 11

<sup>4</sup> For further information email [friendsofarchive@hotmail.com](mailto:friendsofarchive@hotmail.com)

<sup>5</sup> *Annual Review 1998-99*, page 6

<sup>6</sup> Following the name change, Annual Reviews stopped reporting product sales figures in the main text. Relevant figures in the financial appendixes are opaque.

production house, even a video chain; but definitely not a public institution, much less an archive. It lacked the necessary gravitas and dignity. It did not translate into other languages, and communicated no self evident meaning. It produced some risible reactions like “smacks of shonky used car salesman”, “sounds like a firm that does double glazing”. Difficult to grasp, it yielded many confused variants, including SunScreen, FilmScreen, SmokeScreen, ScreamFound, National Screen Australia and the inversion SoundScreen (which also proved to be an existing trade name in the building industry).

It also emerged that the new name which was supposed to be unique was not. Screen sound is a technical term for sound tracks. ScreenSound Australia might literally mean Sound Tracks Australia. Further, the name already belonged to others, including the Sydney post-production studio Screensound Pty Ltd, and the society for screen sound professionals, the Australian Screen Sound Guild. Both have since been adversely affected by their apparently oblivious government competitor. Every month Screensound Pty Ltd receives, and redirects, hundreds of mis-addressed emails intended for the Archive.<sup>7</sup>

Both before and after the name change, the perceived lack of consultation and debate, despite the involvement of a consultant, was disempowering to some of the Archive’s most important supporters. The sense of dispossession is evident in the recollection of a participant in the hastily-arranged “focus groups” which preceded the change:

**We were shown montages of images and asked which ones best illustrated how we thought of the Archive. We tried to say that none of them did, but this was not an acceptable answer, and the question was simply rephrased until we provided an answer that fitted their preconceptions. I cannot remember the debate about the name, but do remember vividly feeling both really angry and completely helpless as I left, and sharing this with others who felt the same.**<sup>8</sup>

What issues arise from these events?

The first concerns the centrality of the professional descriptor *archive*. ‘Are we still an archive?’ one staff member asked me, soon after the change. The term had been dropped overnight without explanation, and as it rapidly became politically incorrect within the institution and its parent Department<sup>9</sup>, the vocabulary of marketing – terms like *positioning*, *branding*, *strategic alliances* and *new identity* – gained ascendancy.

The NFSA moved suddenly into a kind of professional no-man’s-land. In one stroke, it had distanced itself not only from the international AV archiving movement, and the corresponding national movement, of which it was the putative leader, but also from the profession in which it was a leading teacher<sup>10</sup>. It set itself apart from its international peers, and also from Australia’s other national custodial institutions<sup>11</sup>. It

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<sup>7</sup> See *Out Takes* by Lynden Barber in *The Australian*, 28 June 2002, page 18

<sup>8</sup> Comment provided privately to the author.

<sup>9</sup> *Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA)*

<sup>10</sup> For example, the NFSA operated, then in conjunction with the University of New South Wales, the only postgraduate distance education course in AV archiving in the world.

<sup>11</sup> Self-descriptive and timeless institutional titles, which communicate country, status and professional descriptor, are a standard international formula, eg. *National Museum of Australia*, *National Archives*

appeared to “vacate the territory” of national responsibility. Researchers doing a web search on the keyword *archive* would now miss it. While the term has since been reinstated in the “formal name”, it appears only in an optional tag line in print, or as a necessary spoken explanatory descriptor in public. Effectively, it has been crowded out of view by the promoted ScreenSound brand. The NFSA’s primary public identity now proclaims no role or mission. Staff, constituency and the general public are now pointed to a brand rather than a profession. *The subliminal message is one of ambivalence about the character, status and identity of the institution.*

The second issue relates to the effect on historical accuracy. Timeless, self-explanatory names symbolise and give entrée to the corporate heritage, a crucial resource and inspiration for professionals. The change of reference points creates a fracture in continuity, a blockage to that entrée, made all the more serious because it suggests substance that is not really there. Beginning with the media package released on 21 June 1999, history has been constantly rewritten as the new name is projected backwards in time, in corporate documents, policies, reports and elsewhere, stealing the past. The pre-June-1999 achievements of NFSA are re-invented as the achievements of ScreenSound. Yet *presentation of the past with integrity is an ethical fundamental for archives*: if an archive cannot be accurate about its own history, what does this say about its general standards?

The third issue relates to the security and continuity of the NFSA itself. Alone among Australia’s national custodial institutions, and contrary to the recommendation of *Time in our hands* and the clear intent of previous governments, the NFSA still lacks enabling legislation declaring its functions, role, mandate and professional nature. In fact, it is not even a legal entity, merely a division of a mega-department of state, so these things cannot be checked against legislation or a public charter, since it has no such backing. *The name National Film and Sound Archive was the essential public declaration of its parameters. By contrast, ScreenSound Australia declares nothing, except perhaps the eclipsing of NFSA.*

*The vulnerability of such a large public archive without a legal personality, a parliamentary charter or declared philosophy, with no independent responsibility for its collections, and with no accountable governing board or council has become frighteningly clear.* It is exposed to the ebb and flow of political interference, contemporary fads, and bureaucratic rationalisation. Fundamental change comes unsought, unexpected and unexplained. Perhaps the name change was just an accident waiting to happen, and anything could follow.

Will the political imperative of justifying the change lead in more unexpected directions? All names generate their own logic over time. The character, status and legitimacy of a National Film and Sound Archive is unequivocal – therein lies its strategic strength. ScreenSound Australia, however, can be made to mean many things – or mean nothing, for it has no inherent authority or meaning.

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*of Zimbabwe, New Zealand Film Archive, National Library of Venezuela, State Moving Image and Sound Archive of Sweden.* The word “national” can be an important qualifier in a federal country where there are state or provincial counterparts.

This uncertainty, along with the methods<sup>12</sup> used to announce and implant the name change, raises fears of hidden agendas and potential threats not only to the NFSA but also – by implication - to other custodial institutions. What is acceptable in this case may well gain acceptance elsewhere.

So the fourth issue concerns the *transparency of informed debate and enquiry*. Custodial institutions are rational places, basing their work on well-understood professional principles, standards and philosophies. It is axiomatic that they be accountable to their constituencies for their decisions, choices and policies, and be ready and willing to expound on their rationales, *including the rationale for their names*. Yet the NFSA's own publications seem to have reflected virtually nothing of the constituency's questions and complaints, while many of those who have expressed views in private (to this author and others) are reluctant to go public.

This leads to the fifth and central issue, and the question I am most frequently asked: *why was it done?* The few official justifications for the change have been brief and not necessarily consistent. The longest exposition published to date appeared in the Spring 2000 issue of *News from the archive* and is here quoted in full:

### **National Screen and Sound Archive**

**You may have noticed in our last newsletter and this one that we are using our formal name, National Screen and Sound Archive. This name contains the two important descriptors of the organisation, namely National and Archive. We are the national organisation in our field and we are an archive.**

**Our marketing brand name and logo, ScreenSound Australia, is a contraction of the formal name. It replaces the previous shorthand for our organisation, namely NFSA (an acronym meaningless to the broader public and difficult to recall) This branding is another step in a long-term effort to increase recognition of our work among a wider audience (such as educational and youth markets).**

**We are still the same national audiovisual archive, playing a key role in documenting and interpreting the Australian experience and actively contributing to the development of the audiovisual industry. But now we have a name that reflects that role more accurately in a way that will help raise awareness among all our audiences, especially younger audiences.**

The assertions invite many questions, for they are all disputable and no supporting evidence is given. So do the omissions, as there is no reference to the abandonment of the formal name The National Collection of Screen and Sound, nor explanation of when and why it was dropped. And so do the additions, like the reappearance of the word 'archive', and the appeal to educational and youth markets, which seems to have emerged as an afterthought.

In an institution admired internationally for its comprehensive policy base, the apparent absence of a larger and more rigorously argued statement of rationale for something as fundamental as its name is a significant and ominous omission.

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<sup>12</sup> Re-naming, secrecy, surprise, repetition, removal of existing reference points, and non-explanation are all techniques of psychological control historically used by totalitarian regimes.

Here we confront the essential character and *raison d'être* of an archive. Promotion and awareness raising are crucial, of course, but the credibility of archives, libraries and museums does not rest on the arts of the marketer. It rests on the substance and quality of their performance in the core tasks of assembling, protecting, educating, researching and facilitating use of public heritage. This, in turn, relies on the values and skills of scholarship, curatorial expertise, intellectual integrity, and accountability. It follows that publishing a detailed rationale for its name change, dealing, *inter alia*, with the issues mentioned in this article, is indispensable to the Archive's intellectual credibility.

A central lesson is that we cannot treat our institutional names lightly. The name of an archive has many owners, because the institution grows and lives through the loyal support of many constituents. Names can be powerful and precious, and they carry a wealth of meaning, symbolism and associations. In Shakespeare's words: "he that filches from me my good name/ robs me of that which not enriches him/ and makes me poor indeed."<sup>13</sup>

Where to now?

After fifteen years developing a clear and admired international identity as Australia's National Film and Sound Archive, the institution has suffered three years of self-imposed confusion which has divided and alienated supporters, muddied its identity, and damaged its credibility. The exemplar has now become the salutary lesson, a fact which has not been lost on an international community where the NFSA now answers to four names instead of one, and is embarrassingly out of step with global norms.

Throughout the shifting sands of the last three years, however, there has been one obvious constant. This is the emphasis on replacing the name **National Film and Sound Archive** with **ScreenSound Australia** as the Archive's public identity and reference point: not on merit, nor by explanation and debate befitting the intellectual integrity of a professional institution, but by the psychology of surprise, repetition, and silence. However comical and foolish the sequence of changes, and whatever minor adjustments were forced by complaints, this emphasis has been unwavering. And consider the effect: every time one uses the new name, even if one dislikes or disapproves of it, it is nevertheless validated and reinforced. *We become unwitting, and perhaps unwilling, accomplices in making such a dubious strategy self-fulfilling.*

The Archive's current strategic plan (2001-2003) and other documents on its website acknowledge the importance of accountability, professionalism and performance assessment, yet contain little hint of the history, issues and concerns mentioned in this article. One seeks in vain, for example, any stated intention to evaluate the success of the 1999 name change against its original objectives, or any addressing of the critical questions of legislation, or of the other issues highlighted by this and other writers. By now many constituents have apparently concluded that it is futile to keep complaining to an organisation that seems beyond accountability, and unwilling to engage in rational explanation or debate.

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<sup>13</sup> *Othello* III. iii. 153

For a major and very vulnerable public entity entrusted with the guardianship of the national audiovisual heritage, reliant on the trust and goodwill of its voluntary supporters, and which expects to be taken seriously as a professional and intellectual leader, a full public evaluation of the events and decisions of the last three years is surely an essential demonstration of good governance. Indeed, the events point further to the need for a proper public inquiry into the governance, circumstances and future needs of an Archive that will be an increasingly vital part of the cultural spectrum.

Australia deserves a national audiovisual archive that is in every way the professional and cultural equal of its peers here and overseas, that is genuinely responsive, rigorous, transparent and accountable, and that is not ashamed to proclaim its nature and place in the world.

In Britain, where the name of the venerable National Film and Television Archive was altered in 1998 to the ambivalent “BFI Collections” (prefiguring what happened to the NFSA a year later), a recent management change has just seen the original name reinstated, to international relief and approval. Other European and American archives reviewing their names have examined, and rejected, the ScreenSound precedent and its dangers. No one has yet copied it. Is the rest of the world out of step with Australia? “We all wondered why you did it”, commented one senior American archivist, “now how are you going to get out of it?”

The unfinished business of achieving an Act of Parliament to protect and define the Archive, and of restoring its name and identity to normal, is a difficult but essential task. Its future cannot be taken for granted. Recent events have weakened it philosophically and strategically. Continued failure to address the issues above will diminish respect and weaken it further.

It was in the face of bureaucratic opposition that grass roots activism first brought the NFSA into being in 1984. It seems such activism is still necessary to finish the job, and finally give us back an institution that is secure in its mandate, and proud of its identity and mission as the National Film and Sound Archive.

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This article is largely based on the author’s longer and more detailed essay, **A Case of Mistaken Identity: Governance, Guardianship and the ScreenSound Saga**, published in *Archives and Manuscripts*, Journal of the Australian Society of Archivists, Vol. 30, No.1, May 2002, pp 30 – 46. Copies of this essay are available by emailing the author at [ray@archival.com.au](mailto:ray@archival.com.au)

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Emeritus. In 1987 he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for his professional work. Long active in the international forums of the audiovisual archiving field, Ray currently holds office in two of its federations (SEAPAVAA and AMIA), and teaches and consults in several countries. He writes and speaks widely, is the author of 'A Philosophy of Audiovisual Archiving' (UNESCO, 1998) and has recently completed the revised general guidelines for UNESCO's Memory of the World program.