

Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy, Principles and Ethics

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I hope I'll be forgiven, at the outset, for stating something that is obvious to me now but for most of my 35 year career as a film and sound archivist was not obvious at all. That is that people in our profession spend a lot of time researching and describing *what* we do, and *how* we do it, *but why* we do it tends to get a much lighter brush, if indeed it's not ignored altogether. The assumptions, principles and values on which our work is based easily get taken for granted. Because we assume them to be self evident, we tend not to articulate them. And that, in turn, can potentially put us and our institutions in a very risky position.

That's why, several years ago, I and a number of colleagues in several countries began discussing these issues and this led, in due course, to a UNESCO publication in 1998 called *A Philosophy of Audiovisual Archiving*. To our satisfaction, it evidently met a need and gradually spread widely among archivists and archives around the world. It also produced much useful feedback and debate. More recently, UNESCO commissioned me to prepare a much longer revised edition, with a revised title - *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles* – which has been recently published in English, Spanish and French versions. I'll be drawing heavily on this in the remarks that follow. (I do encourage you to read the whole monograph, of course!)

Lest it be assumed that I am talking about something cerebral and intellectual which doesn't have much to do with the day to day realities we all face, I need to add that this is basic, nitty gritty stuff. It not only goes to the heart of the intellectual rigour which we need to bring to our work: it is fundamental to the character of our institutions and to our motivations as individual professionals. More than that, I believe it is fundamental to the long term survival of both our institutions and our profession. We need to be sure of our ground, because we have battles to fight.

Why do I say this? We know that our traditional problems flow from having insufficient resources, being custodians of media that have inbuilt self-destruct mechanisms and being members of a relatively small and not very influential profession. But now we are finding our institutional structures and the assumptions on which they work are under attack by authorities who seem to have little understanding or regard for the values we have worked to establish.¹ The specific instances of this are perhaps less important than the fact that I don't think we are well prepared for what is happening. We need to get our philosophical house in order, so to speak, so we are clear about what we stand for and what we are defending. That means being *descriptive* – recognising and documenting what is actually the case – rather than *prescriptive* and imposing theories or constructs.

Having sounded a call to battle I'm now going to offend my fellow librarians (for that is my formal qualification) by objecting to a long standing convention. The philosophy of audiovisual archiving may have much in common with the other custodial professions, but it is logical that it should *arise from the*

nature of the audiovisual media, rather than by automatic analogy from those professions. By the same token, audiovisual documents deserve to be described in terms of *what they are*, rather than *what they are not*, and traditional terms like “non-book”, “non-text”, “new media” or “special materials”, which are common parlance in libraries and general archives, are inappropriate. Would it not be equally logical to describe books or correspondence files as “non-audiovisual” materials? The implication that one type of document is “normal” or “standard”, while everything else, defined in reference to it, is of lesser status, is illogical. It may seem a small matter but it indicates a mind set, a world view, that is unhelpful.

I'll return to the question of a “mind set”. But first, let's consider what is meant by the idea of a “philosophy”.

What is philosophy?

All human activity is based on values, assumptions or knowledge of certain truths, even if these are perceived instinctively and not articulated (“if I don't breathe, I'll suffocate”). All societies, likewise, function because there are common values or commonly applied rules, often expressed in written forms, such as laws or constitutions. These in turn are based on *values*, which may or may not be articulated within them, but which underlie them and their application.

Philosophy takes the matter of values and assumptions a stage further, asking questions like “why?” “what are the fundamental principles and nature of”? “what is the whole of which I can only see a part?” and expressing the answers in a logical system or worldview. Religions, political systems and jurisprudence are expressions of philosophies. So are the fields of activity which we usually call “professions” – the practice of medicine, for example, has a philosophical basis which recognises the sanctity of life and the well being of the individual as a normal and desirable state.

Philosophies are powerful, because the theories, worldviews and frames of reference they create are the basis of actions, decisions, structures and relationships. Audiovisual archivists, like librarians, museologists and other custodial professionals, exercise a particular kind of power over the survival, accessibility and interpretation of the world's cultural memory. Recognising the theories, the principles, the assumptions and the realities influencing their work therefore becomes a matter of some importance, not only for the professionals themselves but for society at large.

Theorising is a tool for exploring and understanding this professional terrain. I've indicated that audiovisual archivists *need* to understand and reflect on their philosophical foundations if they are to exercise their power responsibly, and be open to discussion and debate in defending their principles and practices, while avoiding the temptation to retreat into inflexible dogmas. Otherwise, action in archives runs the risk of being arbitrary and inconsistent, based on unchallenged intuition or capricious policies. Such archives are unlikely to be reliable, predictable or trustworthy places. Nor, I believe, are they likely to be permanent or secure.

Our institutions

The concepts of the library, the archive and the museum are inherited from antiquity. The accumulation and transmission of memory from one generation to another is a unique feature and a sustaining motivation of human society. The 19th and 20th centuries have been characterised by a new, technological form of memory – the photograph, the sound recording and the moving image. Now its preservation and accessibility depends on a new discipline synthesised from these three traditions. The philosophy and

principles of audiovisual archiving, of guarding and sustaining that new kind of memory, stands on their foundations. The philosophy *in* audiovisual archiving – what is done and not done, and why – is the consequence of these foundational principles and values.

It is not a detached or clinical discussion. Passion, power and politics are as inseparable from audiovisual archiving as they are from the older collecting disciplines. The desire to protect memory coexists with the desire to control it or destroy it. It has been said that ‘no man and no force can abolish memory’.² But history has shown, and no more dramatically than in the last hundred years, that it can be distorted and manipulated, and that its carriers are tragically vulnerable to both neglect and willful destruction.

In other words, the conscientious and objective preservation of memory is an inherently political and value-laden act. *There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation.*³

‘Archive’

Think, for example, of the many connotations of the simple word ‘archive’.

The word *archive* derives from the Latin *archivum*, denoting a ‘public building’ and ‘record’, and the Greek *archeion*, literally ‘place of the *archon* [superior magistrate]’. Both in turn derive from the word *arche* which has multiple meanings including ‘origin’, ‘power’ and ‘beginning’. In Chinese the word for archive is *zīliàoguǎn* (資料館) which could be rendered as *asset-arrangement-hall*. Each of the constituent characters has numerous alternative meanings, some of which may enrich understanding. So the modern term has a variety of connotations within, and between, individual languages and cultures.⁴ These include:

- A building or part of a building where public records or historical documents are kept and arranged: a repository
- A receptacle or container in which physical documents are kept, such as a filing cabinet or box
- A digital location, such as a place in a computer directory, where computer documents are retained
- The records or documents themselves, which are assumed to be non-current and may relate to the activities, rights, claims etc. of a person, family, corporation, community, nation or other entity
- The agency or organization responsible for collecting and storing the documents

The verb *to archive* can also, by extension, have a variety of nuances which include the placing of documents in a receptacle, location or repository; the guardianship, organisation, maintenance and retrieval of those documents; and the administration of the agency or place in which the documents are kept.

Audiovisual archiving, then, is a field which embraces all aspects of the guardianship and retrieval of audiovisual documents, the administration of the places in which they are contained, and of the organizations responsible for carrying out these functions. It has gained its own particular nuances as the field has developed, and as the terms *preservation* and *access* have taken on particular meanings within it.

Of course, it is important to note two other terms, also central to the collecting and custodial professions: *library* and *museum*, each with its own world of meaning. In the Greco-Roman tradition, *Library* is derived from the Latin *librarium*, a place to keep books; *museum* is a Latin word derived from the Greek *mouseion*, the seat of the Muses, or a place of study. The modern concept of a library is perhaps that of a study or reference resource of published materials in a variety of formats, not just books: that of a museum a place for the keeping, study and presentation of objects of historic, scientific or artistic value.

It is a matter of history that our field has chosen to identify primarily with the generic term *archive* rather than either of the two alternatives. All three terms, however, are powerful and evocative, suggesting alignment with worldwide professions, standards and ethos, cultural guardianship, reliability and continuity.

The audiovisual archive

So what is an audiovisual archive and how does it differ from the kind of institutions that we traditionally associate with the words library, museum and archive?

I can best illustrate this through a case study. Come with me to the Republic of Betonia, a small country situated north of Utopia and south of Arcadia. A few years ago, a staff member in the Betonian Ministry of External Affairs and Trade (MEAT) was moving some furniture and behind an old filing cabinet found several cans of film. On examination, these proved to contain a complete copy of a famous travelogue of Betonia. Made in 1938, it was long thought to have been lost and the discovery caused much excitement and media attention.

This was because the film had many unusual features, as will be apparent from the attached advertisement (which appeared at the time in a film trade magazine). It was brilliantly directed by the country's National Artist, Otis Criblecoblis, a revered figure. It was narrated by the country's president, Mahatma Kane Jeeves – the only instance of a head of state narrating a film. It was shot in colour in a then-revolutionary wide-screen process which made the film visually spectacular, but perhaps ironically led to its fall into obscurity because relatively few theatres had the correct equipment to screen it. And, of course, it showed a vanished land and way of life, for Betonia is now very industrialized and many of its traditions and skills, along with its sylvan forests and birds, have disappeared.

This precious film must be protected and preserved, but by whom? The Minister convened a meeting of the heads of the National Museum, National Library, National Archives, National Art Gallery and the National Audiovisual Archive, and asked each of them which institution should have the responsibility of custodianship.

The Director of the National Museum spoke first, pointing out that the film had been photographed in a long obsolete colour process and an unusual wide screen format, and it was therefore a rare and precious artefact which belonged in the Museum. The National Library, for its part, laid claim to the film on the grounds of Betonian history: such a rare photographic record obviously belonged in the national collection of Betoniana. The National Archives insisted that it was a government record, since it was narrated by the

The Glories of Betonia!

Misty mountains, verdant valleys, sun - splashed seashores – the sylvan forests and rustic villages of a timeless land - as you have never seen them before!!

*EXALT to the music and traditional dances of the spaghetti harvest!!
SEE AND HEAR the rare crested thistlethwaite in its natural habitat!!
WITNESS the rare and ancient skill of toothbrush holesmanship!!
THRILL as the death-defying log hoppers ride the rapids!!*

YOU MUST SEE

SO WE SAY FAREWELL

Personally hosted and narrated by His Excellency
PRESIDENT MAHATMA KANE JEEVES

Conceived and Directed by the National Artist OTIS CRIBLECOBLIS

*Photographed in breathtaking DUFAYCOLOR and SCREEN-
GRANDEUR*

Produced by the BETONIAN NATIONAL FILM UNIT for the MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND TRADE

Copyright 1938 – World rights reserved

President and produced by a government ministry, and all government records came to the National Archives. The National Art Gallery pointed out that the film was a creation of the National Artist, so it should be in the custody of the Gallery along with all the other works of Otis Criblecoblis.

The Director of the National Audiovisual Archive was the last to speak. “It should come to us”, he said, “because it is a film. We can recognise it in its own right and not just as an aspect of something else. We can also recognise that it has many attributes – as history, art, government record and artefact. We can celebrate all of these, as well as caring for it physically.”

That story is a way of illustrating the point that all custodial institutions bring a particular perspective or world view to bear on the vast amount of material of potential interest to them. This world view allows them to select, describe, arrange and provide access to it in meaningful ways. The institutions have much in common: the disciplines of collection building, the management and conservation of collection material and the provision of access to users are standard elements. There are cultural motivations and ethics, which transcend the mechanical and utilitarian; there is the management of competing demands on slim resources. Differences arise in the way these functions are addressed.

Although influenced by tradition and history, these worldviews are *not* essentially determined by the physical format of the material: libraries, archives, museums and audiovisual archives all collect paper based formats, audiovisual formats and computer-based formats, for example, and all are increasingly delivering and acquiring material by digital means. Yet we recognise the differences in worldview and systems. Libraries, traditionally the repository of the written and printed word, are the providers of mostly published information in all formats. Archives deal with the accumulated records of social or organisational activity, much of it unpublished but arranged in context, and finding aids – not catalogues – provide the entry point. Museums may be said to deal in objects rather than documents, the material evidence of people and their environment. Audiovisual archives combine elements of all three worldviews, and more.

Preservation and access⁵

So I’d like to look at *preservation* and *access* and what these terms mean to an audiovisual archive. They are two sides of the same coin, and before discussing them separately let’s consider them together. They are so interdependent that access can be seen as an **integral part** of preservation. Indeed, the widest definition of *preservation* embraces almost the totality of an archive’s curatorial functions.

Preservation is necessary to ensure permanent accessibility. Access carries risks and costs, however great or small; yet preservation without prospect of access is pointless. It might be said, however, that while in many institutions preservation is conceived of as an ‘added extra’ to the functioning of the organisation, it is conceptually *central* to the functioning of an audiovisual archive.

Because audiovisual media are technologically based, the realities of preservation impinge on all the functions of an audiovisual archive and are integral to day-to-day operation. Preservation shapes the archive’s perceptions and decisions; access always has technological and cost implications. The possible modes range from, say, retrieving a CD or DVD from a shelf to making a new film print from preservation materials and tying up a cinema for several hours to project it. Whatever the choice, the mode of access should not put the survival of the work at *unacceptable* risk. If the cost can’t be met at that time, access may be withheld until it can be afforded and has sufficient priority. And when I say *unacceptable*, I’m using a relative term. Some archives have strict rules governing the mechanisms of access that easily take on the aura of the absolute. But there can be no absolutes: only degrees of risk. Each archive decides for itself how to manage the risks of access, and its rules will be determined by current political and strategic, as well as technical and financial, considerations. They will evolve over time.

Accordingly it might be said that *preservation* is the **totality of things necessary to ensure the permanent accessibility – forever – of an audiovisual document with the maximum integrity**.

Potentially, it embraces a great many processes, principles, attitudes, facilities and activities. These may include *conservation* and *restoration* of the carrier, *reconstruction* of a definitive version, *copying* and *processing* of the visual and/or sonic content, *maintenance* of the carriers within appropriate storage environments, *recreation* or *emulation* of obsolete technical processes, equipment and presentation environments, research and information gathering to support these activities.

Nevertheless, for historical reasons, the term *preservation* is widely used – even by archivists – simply as a synonym for copying or duplication.⁶ This unfortunately tends to reinforce the misleading idea that making a new copy from a threatened carrier is the end of the story when, in fact, it is only the beginning. Preservation is not a discrete process, but rather a never-ending management task. How well the recording or film survives in the long term – if it survives at all – will be determined by the quality and rigour of that process, under a succession of management regimes, into the indefinite future. Nothing has ever *been* preserved – at best, it is *being* preserved!

This misuse of the term *preservation*, while ignoring the underlying practicalities, presents a communication challenge for archivists, because it is also open to commercial exploitation. For example, the common use of the phrase “digitally remastered” on the packaging of DVDs or VHS cassettes implies much more than the unrefined copying process which is probably all that has occurred. Services offering to “preserve” one’s 8mm home movies by having them copied to DVD imply much more than the simple format change being offered.

So what is *access*? It is correspondingly also a term of great scope. I suggest that it means **any form of use of an archive’s collection, services or knowledge, including playback in real time of sound and moving image holdings and reference to sources of information about sound and moving image holdings and the subject areas they represent**. It can be *proactive* (initiated by the institution itself) or *reactive* (initiated by users of the institution). A subsequent stage may be the provision of copies of selected material created to the client’s order.

The only limit to *proactive access* is imagination. It may include the regular broadcast of collection material on radio or television; public screenings; the lending of prints or recordings for presentation outside the archive; the making of reconstructed versions of films or programs that exist only in partial or damaged versions; the creation of collection based products (CDs, DVDs, VCRs) to increase the universal availability of material; the digitization and delivery of material on-line; and exhibitions, lectures and presentations of all kinds. In all of these activities, the role of the curator in interpreting and providing context to the material is crucial. The unmediated use and misuse of archival material – for example, the broadcasting or sale of poor quality copies, or the cliché of running of old footage at the wrong speed in television documentaries and (even worse) electronically adding artificial scratches to make it look ‘authentic’ – devalues it and creates erroneous perceptions of its character and significance.

Perhaps more than other collecting institutions, audiovisual archives have to build their access services around the commercial realities of copyright control. The provision of public access often involves the prior obtaining of permission from a copyright owner, and - frequently - the resultant payment of fees. Many films and recordings are commercial products with considerable revenue-earning potential (for the copyright owner, not necessarily the archive!) and archives need to be vigilant about the potential contravention of these rights. It is a complex area, becoming rapidly more complex with technological change, and archives need to regularly have recourse to legal advice.

Perspectives on both preservation and access differ between non-commercial and commercial archives. The former tend to view their collections as cultural objects: the motivation to preserve and provide access arises from perceptions of cultural value and research demand, and these notions figure largely in the setting of priorities. The latter are engaged in a form of asset management, and preservation priorities are determined by marketing imperatives, such as release schedules for CDs, DVDs or cable television.

Exploring nature and concept

It is obvious that the audiovisual media are a range of distinctive, characteristic **physical carriers** – both current and obsolescent – whose formats are strongly embedded in public consciousness. The gramophone disc and the perforated film are recognisable and tactile icons which communicate universally, even though sounds and images are also recorded on less visually distinctive carriers like magnetic tape and computer hard drives. Likewise the associated technology is represented by well-understood visual icons: the phonograph horn, the loudspeaker, the film reel, the projector and projector beam, the screen at an angled perspective.

At the same time, the moving images and sounds which these physical formats embody have **no objective existence** as such. Moving images are actually created in the mind through the phenomenon of *persistence of vision* – a sequence of still images revealed in a rapid succession beyond a certain frequency threshold is perceived as a moving image. Likewise, sound is a series of disturbances in the air impinging on our auditory senses which we *interpret* in meaningful ways – as music, speech, noise and so on.

As an optical/acoustic phenomenon, perceived through the *subjective* channels of individual sight and hearing, the audiovisual media share certain characteristics with the static visual media - such as photography and painting - but are intrinsically different from text-based media, which communicate by means of a code which is intellectually interpreted. Perception relies on the mediation of a technological device between the carrier and the listener/viewer: one cannot hear a disc or a tape by looking at it, nor watch a film by holding it or unwinding it.

The internal physics and chemistry of audiovisual carriers make many of them very vulnerable to inappropriate temperature and humidity, the effects of atmospheric pollution, mould and various types of decay and distortion which affect their physical integrity and the quality of the image and sound information they contain. Some have a useful shelf life of just a few decades – or less – while experience is demonstrating that others can be surprisingly robust. Accordingly archives try to store their collections in stable, low temperature/ low humidity environments which minimize degradation, maximize shelf life and buy time.

Even more vulnerable than the carrier, in many ways, is the recording and playback **technology**. Rapid obsolescence is a feature of the audiovisual field. Formats constantly change, and even if the carriers survive in good condition they may well outlive the industrial life of the playback technology on which their continued accessibility depends. Archives collectively are faced with the problem of maintaining obsolete technology which has been abandoned by the audiovisual industries.

Audiovisual carriers, more than their older counterparts, are at **circumstantial** risk of survival. The industry which creates them is not always attuned to the values and practicalities of preservation; material does not necessarily exist in a profusion of multiple copies. Huge quantities of film have been recycled to recover silver; shellac recordings have been used as filler in road construction. Magnetic carriers – audio and videotape and computer discs - are easily reusable so that survival of a program can be constantly at risk for economic or practical reasons.

Even in a well ordered and well housed collection, constant monitoring is highly desirable. In unregulated storage, degradation phenomena like vinegar syndrome can be contagious, causing a chain reaction in neighbouring carriers. Likewise, serious and sustained distortions in storage temperature or humidity can compromise an entire collection. Mould and fungus feed on the organic parts of carriers. Audio visual media do not look after themselves over the long term: they need deliberate action to ensure their survival, and over time that usually means institutional action.

Decay, obsolescence and migration

The expectation of carrier decay, combined with the seeming inevitability of continuing format change, has an ultimate consequence: image and sound **content** can survive and continue to remain accessible only through **migration**: the copying or transfer of content from one carrier to another. On this experience and expectation is based the copying programs undertaken by audiovisual archives throughout the last 70 years or more: the transfer of the content of nitrate films onto triacetate or polyester based film, the copying of audio from degrading discs and tapes onto fresh analogue or digital carriers, migration from obsolescent to current carriers while the old technology was still operational.

This apparently simple principle is fraught with dilemmas. The mismatch between the viable life of the carrier and the commercial life of the technology is often considerable. In practice, the process of migration entails some degree of loss or distortion of the image or sound information, and a change in the viewing/listening experience. Decision making is of necessity based on inadequate knowledge: predictions are not always confirmed by subsequent experience.

Archives have responded to these dilemmas in a variety of ways. By storing and managing collections in benign environments they have lengthened carrier life and so delayed the need for migration. By developing ways of keeping obsolete technology and skills functional they have ‘bought time’ for continued carrier accessibility and longer migration programs. By taking conservative approaches they

have allowed time for the accumulation of knowledge through practical experience, and this has led to changes in strategy.

The classic example of this dilemma has been the changing approach to the preservation of cellulose nitrate film. It was adopted in the 1890s as the standard professional film base, despite its flammability, because it was a tough, flexible, transparent – and relatively cheap - support for photographic emulsion. Little was known about its stability over time, nor does this appear to have been an issue, though assumptions about its long term viability were sometimes made. When its propensity for chemical decomposition later became clear, film archives began to make preservation copies on non-flammable triacetate film, which was then believed to have a life of several centuries.

In the 1950s the film stock manufacturers progressively abandoned nitrate in favour of triacetate, for both practical and economic reasons. As a result, nitrate film soon came to be perceived as “dangerous goods”, generating a widening syndrome of institutional and official reaction which at times verged on panic, and which favoured the destruction of nitrate stocks. It became received archival wisdom that all nitrate film would decompose by 2000, so that finding and copying the surviving heritage became an increasingly urgent crusade. Practicality and politics encouraged both archives and film companies to destroy their nitrate holdings after making acetate copies, thus reducing the costs of storage.

We now know that such destruction was a mistake. By the 1980s, triacetate film had begun to reveal its own form of self-destruction – “vinegar syndrome” – and it became apparent that nitrate film, well stored and managed, lasted much longer than first thought (there are reels over 100 years old still in good condition). Continuing improvements in film printing technology now allow much better results than were possible even 10 years ago. Where nitrate material has been retained it is now often in better condition than the sometimes inferior triacetate copies made from it just 20 or 30 years ago. Moreover, public perceptions about the viability of nitrate film – the “nitrate won’t wait” message promoted, in good faith, by archives until quite recently - need to be changed.⁷

Audiovisual archives, therefore, must continuously manage the **inertia effect**. On the one hand, they are pressed by both practical necessity and popular perception to constantly ‘upgrade’ to the newest and most fashionable format. “Have you digitised your collection yet?” is a familiar current question to many archivists. On the other hand, repeated migration of large quantities of collection material not only becomes a physical impossibility: it makes neither curatorial nor economic sense. Rather, archives have to manage an increasingly complex equation which keeps the physical viability of their collection in balance with their ability to maintain the obsolescent or ‘legacy’ technology and associated skills which permit access and maintenance. Creating access copies in current digital formats, while maintaining preservation copies in older formats, is part of that equation.

Historically, audiovisual archiving has constantly adapted to the shifting realities of the marketplace. As a group, archives lack the critical mass to decisively influence the development agendas of the audiovisual industries. They can propose and encourage, and their concerns are sometimes heeded in the refining of carriers and systems, or in making company policy more sympathetic to maintaining limited support for old technology. But ultimately archives and archivists, with their limited economic and legislative power, must *react* to change as best they can. This reality imposes great strains and uncertainties on forward planning and staff training. Format evolution is driven by marketing, not archival, values. It can be argued that such rapid historical change is neither necessary, nor does it always result in the best systems winning market dominance.

Content, carrier and context

Audiovisual media, like other documents, have two components: the audio and/or visual **content** and the **carrier** on which they reside.⁸ The two can be closely related and, where possible, access to both is important. The migration of content from one carrier to another, for purposes of preservation or access, may be necessary or convenient, but in the process critical information and contextual meaning may be lost.

The increasing ease with which content can be migrated and ‘re-purposed’ has tended to obscure the importance of this relationship. Many of those who use archival collections seek access to images and sounds in a form convenient to them, and where such convenience outweighs other considerations. For example, a piece of silent 35mm newsreel footage may have passed through a variety of film and video copying stages before being included in a television documentary. What goes to air may be in the wrong aspect ratio, be shown at the wrong speed, be used in an inaccurate context, and bear little resemblance to the visual clarity of the original material – but it suffices for the purpose of the production. What’s more, it may well reinforce clichéd views about ‘old film’ looking grainy, scratchy, washed out, and moving too fast.

Change in format, therefore, can also result in change in content. The loss of image or sound quality is, by definition, a change in content. Manipulation of the content in the process of migration can also change the intrinsic character of the work – ‘enhancement’ of the sound, or colourisation of a black and white image, are examples. A video image differs in texture to the film image from which it was derived (and vice versa). A CinemaScope film shot at a 2.35 to 1 aspect ratio becomes a different work when it is reformatted to 1.33 to 1 for television use or video release – effectively discarding half of its visual content and disrupting its grammar and visual composition.

Like other objects, audiovisual carriers are *artefacts* and attributes intrinsic to the object *cannot* be migrated. They can, at best, only be approximated on the new carrier. Looking for examples from the pre-1950 era, one might cite the visual characteristics of silver-rich film emulsions, chemically-based tinting and toning, and obsolete colour processes such as dual emulsion Cinecolor, cross-hatched Dufaycolor or dye-transfer Technicolor which can only be accurately experienced by projecting the original prints. Shellac and vinyl gramophone records, and their packaging, are tactile objects often intended to be looked at as well as listened to. Essential discographical information may be physically etched into the carrier. The provenance of a film and the mechanics of film production, editing and processing can only be fully understood by examining the artefacts themselves.

It may be argued that magnetic media – such as audio and video tape and floppy discs – have less artefact value than phonograph cylinders, discs or films. To the extent that they are not ‘human readable’ this may be true, but it is a difference of degree. They have artefact value as representatives of their formats, and if designed as consumer products they also have visual and tactile artefact value like their older cousins. Even in the apparently carrier-less environment of image and sound downloads from the internet the dichotomy holds true. The carrier is the hard disk or the floppy – the content is what you see and hear, mediated through the software and the characteristics of your computer. Successive generations of software and hardware may subtly or even dramatically change the audiovisual content as you perceive it.

In the practical environment of archives and collections where sufficient curatorial expertise is not available, the discarding of original carriers and packaging after migration can result in the loss of vital provenance and other information. Manufacture dates, for example, may be encoded on the original film

stock. Descriptive information may be written on the original tape box or on labels adhering to the tape reel.

Audiovisual works are not made in a vacuum. They are the products of a time and a place and can only be fully appreciated as such in their proper *context*. An Edison cylinder recording is best appreciated when replayed on the original technology – an acoustic phonograph. A 1930s sound feature film is best viewed by projecting a 35mm print in a large theatre with sound reproduced through a contemporary system, not a modern one. A 1930's radio show is best enjoyed in a home environment on a mantel or cabinet radio, not on a tiny transistor set (which didn't exist at the time.) It is, of course, often impossible - or at least impractical - to recreate the original presentation context, not least because people in the 21st century have a different life experience to those who lived 50, 75 or 100 years ago. But that does not make the need to fill the contextual vacuum any less important – by explanation and audience preparation, if in no other way.

The availability of the original *technology* is an essential element in re-creating context and here, over time, archives are faced with profound dilemmas. When playback technology becomes obsolete, maintenance becomes increasingly difficult as the supply of spare parts diminishes and finally stops. To keep equipment operational, archives have to resort to other expedients, such as ‘cannibalising’ parts from spare machines, or devising ways of manufacturing parts themselves. This can buy time, but there are limits. While the relatively simple technology of film projectors and mechanical-acoustic record players can be maintained more or less indefinitely, electronic technology cannot. It relies on the availability of large and complex industrial infrastructures; so, for instance, the manufacture of such items as audio and video record/ playback heads and laser assemblies for CD players are beyond the present capabilities of audiovisual archives.

Nor is operational but obsolete technology much use without the *skills* to run and maintain it. Once they are no longer part of the industry mainstream, such skills become esoteric: the province of the individual enthusiast and the audiovisual archive. Accordingly, it is strategic for archives to nurture such skills in-house and well as to network with skilled individuals in its wider constituency. A small but increasing number of specialised service companies maintain both the equipment and skills to do migration and restoration work for archives, particularly those with very limited infrastructure of their own. In addition, some larger archives use their own technical infrastructures to offer services to smaller colleague institutions. Such interdependence seems increasingly the only answer to these dilemmas.

The difficulties of contextual integrity also need to be held in tension with a contrasting reality. Audiovisual works presented in a contemporary environment can often speak for themselves in new ways. Compare films like *The Wizard of Oz* or *Los Olvidados* with Shakespearean plays.⁹ Both the films and plays are widely viewed today in contexts far removed from those originally intended, or indeed imagined, by their creators. They are accepted on their own terms, without contextual background, by modern audiences. To that extent they create a new context of their own and are perhaps speaking to contemporary audiences with new meaning.

In a fundamental sense, content is *shaped* by carrier and context. Computer graphics in websites exploit the limitations as well as possibilities of the on-line medium. Pop songs last for 3 or 4 minutes because this was the playing time of a standard Edison cylinder or 78 rpm disc. Sound cinema newsreels lasted no more than 12 minutes because this was by then the maximum running time of a standard 35mm film *reel*. Numerous gags in feature films and cartoons assume that the actors are talking directly to an audience *in a movie theatre* who are also familiar with movie conventions. Outside this context they become

inexplicable. A classic instance is the Warner Bros. Daffy Duck cartoon *Duck Amuck* (1953, d. Chuck Jones) in which all gags are based on the physical nature of the film strip, the colour process and the mechanics of the cartoon medium itself.

Similarly the content of some sound recordings is shaped by the physical character of the disc with a centre hole. The Beatles' best-selling album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (EMI, 1967) in its original vinyl form contains a brief sound sting on the centre play-out loop which the turntable pick up arm will track repeatedly until removed. Having fun with the medium and turntable mechanics was in keeping with the unconventional character of the recording. Transferred to CD or cassette, the whole point of the sound sting is lost. Examples of this kind could be multiplied: you might like to look for other examples in your experience.

The results of ignorance can be serious as well as embarrassing. There is an apocryphal story of an academic who wrote a learned paper developing a theory about Sergei Eisenstein's insertion of subliminal written messages in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). The theory was based on a mistaken assumption. He had failed to realise that the messages were actually flash frames containing tinting instructions for the processing laboratory. Had he understood the provenance of the print or video he was watching, and the working methods of film laboratories in the 1920s, he would not have made the mistake. He was too far removed from the original carrier to correctly interpret what he was seeing.

Analog and digital¹⁰

At present the most controversial and far-reaching debates in the field of audiovisual archiving concern the impact of digitisation. Analog audio and video technology is being phased out and replaced by digital. Film production is increasingly employing digital technology. Are we facing the death of photographic film itself? Are we facing the prospect of digital archiving where everything is kept on computer mass storage systems? If digital-to-digital copying is lossless, are all our preservation problems solved forever? Is this the ultimate? Will we even need audiovisual archives if anything and everything is reduced to digital content which can be called up at will from a computer server?¹¹

The history of our field *should* have taught us to approach all technological predictions with scepticism. The only sure guide we have is accumulated experience. It is unlikely that there is *any* 'ultimate' format. On the basis of past experience we can expect that something else, whatever it is, will come *after* digital media, even if we can't imagine that at present. But perhaps the onset of digitisation, with its opportunities as well as problems, challenges us to examine some philosophical fundamentals.

Because of the **inertia effect**, if for no other reason, we can expect that archives will be managing large collections of carriers in all historical formats – together with the associated technologies and skills - for the foreseeable future. This would be true even if the industries became totally carrier-less and digital tomorrow. The management problems may become more complex, and the migration programs larger, as time goes on. But we are also likely to pay more attention to the artefact value of our collections and the museum-related aspects of our work. There are experiences – such as listening to acoustic recordings on original technology, or viewing silent films with the correct musical ambience – whose enjoyment now relies largely on archives and related organisations. These possibilities and responsibilities will grow.

Analog-to-digital migration is lossy: some content is lost in the process. Digital-to-digital migration is *lossless in theory*, though not necessarily so in practice. The world's archives and libraries face the collective challenge of preserving almost unimaginable quantities of digital data and the prospect of long

term preservation, at this stage, raises as many questions as answers. What will be reliable and feasible in the long term, in a world where digital resources, like other technical resources, are distributed very unevenly, remains to be seen. Issues of software and hardware progression, commercial versus public interest, economic sustainability and risk management, among others, lie ahead.

Audiovisual archives are increasingly using digital technology to provide access to their collections, both on-line and through CD, VCD, DVD and other digital carriers, since this is the form in which users increasingly seek it. Analog content on threatened magnetic carriers, both audio and video, is being migrated to digital form for both access and preservation. Digital techniques are being used in the restoration of audio content and film and video images. At the same time, both access and preservation material on the more stable analog carriers, such as film, and vinyl and shellac discs, is being maintained in that form.

Philosophical challenges

Among other things, preservation in the digital realm, should audiovisual archives move completely in that direction by ultimately converting all analog material, ends the association with human readable records - the form in which almost all documents have been created from the dawn of recorded history up to the 20th century. Film as well as cylinder and disc mechanical recordings are relatively stable carriers whose integrity can be monitored independently of any playback technology. The integrity of audio and video recordings on magnetic tape and computer files, which are not human readable, can only be monitored via the relevant technology. Their retrieval, and the knowledge of their continued existence, depends upon the maintenance of increasingly complex technologies with associated risks. Are the risks acceptable? How long will the technology survive the apparently inexorable tide of obsolescence?

Migration to the digital domain ends the connection with the analog carrier and the associated technology. The content is separated from its physical context and meaning. There is no longer a physical aspect to be experienced, whether that be the tactile experience of handling or examining the carrier or experiencing its reproduction through the original technology. To that extent, the sensory and aesthetic experience disappears.

So does the ability to educate the senses in the difference between the analog original and the digital copy. How will future generations *know* what the difference is – whether it be in visual texture or the subtleties of sound quality? How important is it that they *do* know?

Some would argue that audiovisual archives have long since failed the test of scholarship in this regard. A reputable museum, for example, would not pass off a Roman copy of a Greek statue as if it were a Greek original; nor would the Louvre display a digital copy of *La Gioconda* and deem it to be equivalent to the analog original. Why, then, should an audiovisual archive be content, say, to project acetate or digital copies of a tinted nitrate film without carefully explaining how they differ from the original? It may be argued that the viewer is not interested in the difference; but perhaps the viewer is not aware that there *is* a difference, nor why the difference might matter. It falls to archives, like museums, to set a minimum scholarly standard and educate the public proactively. Otherwise we prejudice and pre-empt the rights of the researcher to have access to all relevant information. To quote Walter Benjamin: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.... The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”¹²

It may therefore be that the greatest challenge of digitisation is not one of technology or economics, but of scholarship, education and ethics. Researchers and audiences have the right to be educated and fully informed about the content/carrier relationship, to have what they see and hear accurately contextualised. To achieve this, archives and archivists themselves will have to fully understand the differences in the character and texture of the various media: and the automatic desire to contextualise will need to be part of their value system.

Scope of ethics

Underpinning everything we do is the question of ethics. In any profession, these arise out basic values and motivations. Some matters are specific to the field itself; some are based on more widely acknowledged norms of life and society. Characteristically, professions codify their ethical standards, creating written statements for the guidance of their members and the reassurance of their stakeholders. Professional bodies frequently have disciplinary mechanisms designed to enforce binding standards – the medical and legal fields are obvious examples.

Within the custodial professions, including the audiovisual archiving profession, codes of ethics exist at the international, national and institutional levels. They deal with both personal and institutional behaviour and emphasise some common themes. These include:

- Protecting the integrity and preserving the context of collection materials
- Probity in access, collection development and other transactions
- The right of access
- Conflicts of interest, and private benefit
- Observing the ‘rule of law’ and policy-based decision making
- Integrity, honesty, accountability and transparency
- Confidentiality
- The pursuit of excellence and professional growth
- Personal conduct, duty of care and professional relationships

Most of the major professional associations have their own codes.¹³ All are relevant as reference points in constructing an institutional code for any audiovisual archive. Here I want to focus on ethical issues specific to audiovisual archiving. So far only one of the audiovisual archiving federations has adopted a formal code of ethics. The International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) Code was adopted in 1998, and adherence to it is obligatory for FIAF members.¹⁴ Other federations have adopted policy stances on individual ethics-related issues.

Codes and applied ethics

A written code, whether international or institution-specific, is a framework providing general guidance. It cannot predict every situation, nor give ready-made solutions to dilemmas requiring on-balance value judgements. Characteristically, professionals accept the responsibility of making judgements in ethical, as in other, matters.

At the institutional level, codes accrue meaning and respect only if they are central to an archive’s life, and are actively promoted and transparently honoured from the top down. This may involve a process of

staff education, monitoring and investigative mechanisms, and administrative routine which personalises the application of the code to each staff member. In some institutions, for example, all staff members are required to read and discuss the corporate code, to commit themselves in writing to observe it, and to declare any existing and potential conflicts of interest. Where such active implementation is neglected, institutional codes pale into background formalities which are observed only when convenient, or used as mere public relations devices.

At the personal level, there is a point beyond which ethical behaviour cannot be policed, and turns on the integrity and conscience of the individual. This applies independently of how well (or otherwise) one's employing institution or professional association observes its own ethical standards. Inevitably, there are personal dilemmas. They can sometimes be risky as well as lonely. They may involve taking an unpopular stance, being a "whistleblower" or – on a different plane - even putting one's career (or more) at risk.

There are documented instances of archivists exposing both life and liberty in order to save collection material from destruction: surely the ultimate professional commitment. More prosaically, I can acknowledge that, like many colleagues, I have struggled with lesser ethical dilemmas. I have written about some of these in the professional literature, as have others. 'Whistleblowing' – drawing official or public attention to malpractice – is now, in some countries, protected by law in principle, although as I can attest first hand, not necessarily in practice.¹⁵

However much we may wish it were otherwise, the preservation of – and access to - the past is an assertion of values and hence of a viewpoint. In other words, it is an intrinsically political activity. Professional debate, as well as the record of deliberate heritage destruction over the last century, amply illustrates that there are always those who, from a variety of motives, will seek to suppress or destroy what has been preserved. Archivists must continually confront the politics of selection, access and preservation, and the ethical questions they raise. Here, too, it is important to be aware of some crucial case studies.¹⁶ The survival of the past is constantly at the mercy of the present. As Judith Panitch says, "Far from standing as enduring monuments to the past, archives instead appear somewhat fragile, eternally subject to the judgment of the society in which they exist. Neither temporal nor absolute, the meaning they convey may be manipulated, misinterpreted or suppressedthe archives of the past are also the mutable creations of the present..."¹⁷

Collections and ethics

The ethical management of collections raises several issues.

There is behind all collection development the assumption of permanency so that deselection of material should not be done lightly, nor contrary to the expectations of the original donors. The deselection decision should be made by the archive's board, council or comparable authority – not by individual curators. The disposal process should first take into account the rights and needs of other collecting institutions who may welcome the surplus material. If, after these steps, the deselected material is offered for public sale, there should be sufficient public explanation to avert unhelpful perceptions about motive or process. Staff members should not, and should not be perceived, to personally benefit from the process. A public access database of all deselected, or potentially disposable, material might not only provide a public service to institutions interested in acquiring surplus items. It may have a sobering effect on decisions made too lightly.

Given the many migration possibilities now open, and the political and practical pressures facing archives to contain costs and collection size, the retention of original carriers for their viable life spans – regardless of what copies have been made - becomes a fundamental matter of curatorial integrity. It follows that the potential for future research and as yet unrealised migration possibilities should never be closed off by their premature disposal or destruction.

The nature of the digital media opens up hitherto unavailable possibilities for manipulating sounds and images to falsify history, without leaving any trace of the action. Such action strikes at the heart of archiving and cannot be countenanced. Archives may need to take preventive measures, including staff education, against such possibilities.

It is in the nature of the audiovisual industries that collectors and other private individuals play a major role in ensuring the survival of audiovisual material, often by unconventional means. In the paramount interest of ensuring the preservation of precious materials, archives will work, with due confidentiality, to reconcile any differing interests between such suppliers and parties who have legitimate rights of intellectual or material ownership to assert. Archives will not exploit such material without due observance of the rule of law.

Ethics of access

Subject to the primary duty to preserve, public archives acknowledge the public *right* of access to their collections. Within the means available to them, they will respond to research enquiries and will proactively present their collections to the public, in contextualised ways, in accordance with a stated access policy. In all cases, the legitimate rights of owners of copyright and other commercial interests shall be fully respected.

In the interests of public access and education, archives may not only *restore* material – that is, remove the effects of damage and age – but also create *reconstructed* versions of films, programs and recordings that have survived in incomplete form, thereby making them more easily comprehensible. This is done by bringing together incomplete or fragmentary elements from multiple sources and rearranging them into a coherent whole, sometimes with considerable manipulation of images and/or sound to fill in gaps in the surviving source material. Such reconstructions are, in effect, *new* productions aimed at contemporary audiences, and may differ significantly from the original work.

Such work needs to be carried out with integrity by skilled curatorial staff in accordance with objectives, principles and methods that are publicly stated, so that the character of the reconstruction is understood by its audiences. A reconstruction statement needs to be prepared to ensure that this information is fully documented. The preservation of the source elements of the reconstruction is *not disturbed* by the reconstruction. They continue to be held and stay potentially available in their original form.

In providing access to their collection materials, archives will, as far as possible, draw the attention of users to contextual information, help them to understand original form and context, and encourage them to use any copies supplied with integrity. Archives will not knowingly be complicit in the deliberate alteration or public misrepresentation of such material, whether through the manipulation of its image or sound content or otherwise.

In devising and providing public presentation environments, archives should create context with integrity. They will resist commercial or other pressure to subordinate presentation standards, styles and

environments to current expedients or fashions, remaining true to the ambience and original intent of the works being presented. This relates especially (but not exclusively) to archive cinemas and related screening environments, and raises issues ranging from correct aspect ratios and projection skills and standards to the use of screen advertising and atmospheric music. For example, even though contemporary screen advertising in an archive cinema may raise much needed income, it is out of context: a little like putting a McDonalds or Coca Cola logo on the *Venus de Milo*.

Institutional ambience and relationships

The ambience and culture of an archive bears on the quality of all its functions. Archives should work to develop an internal culture and community which values individual scholarship, intellectual rigour and enquiry, and the capacity to make and accept responsibility for curatorial judgements. It should encourage the professional development of its people, and value and protect its corporate memory and institutional history.

An archive's dealings should be characterised by accuracy, honesty, due consultation, consistency and transparency. It will not knowingly be party to the dissemination of false, misleading or inaccurate information, nor avoid reasonable questions. It will offer cogent explanations in writing for its decisions and policy stances.

Archives should freely share their knowledge and experience to promote the profession, and aid the development and enlightenment of others in a spirit of collaboration. They accept that by bearing one another's' burdens, the whole profession is enhanced and advanced. Wherever possible, the provision of information, the loan of collection material, participation in joint projects, the exchange of staff and the visitation of external colleagues will be facilitated.

Where permitted, corporate sponsorship should be negotiated and accepted on the basis of fair and mutually beneficial partnerships. Agreements should be in writing, of limited duration, compatible with the archive's character, code of ethics and objectives, and offer a net benefit to the archive.

Personal motivation and conflicts of interest

Audiovisual archiving is not a lucrative field, and relative to the other collecting professions it is too small to offer great opportunities for promotion, status, security and career development. Its practitioners tend to be motivated by other things: an affinity for the audiovisual media, and a passion for its preservation, appreciation and popularisation, and the intrinsic satisfaction of being part of a pioneering field. They also need to be motivated by a willingness to serve the creativity, projects and agendas of others.

Potentially, this affinity can lead to conflicts of interest. These can arise in several ways, such as a financial interest in organisations supplying goods and services to the archive, being a dealer in collectible materials, membership of groups with conflicting aims, or the building of private collections in ways that are – or appear – to be in conflict with the archive's own collecting activity. Such perceptions can be very damaging to an archive's reputation, and if an acceptable accommodation of interests cannot be found, it may be necessary for the individual to end the relevant relationships or activity. The archive's good name must come first.

Other areas of potential conflict include the giving of advice or valuations in a personal capacity which may nevertheless be perceived to be given in an official capacity. If an individual is closely identified with an institution, it becomes hard for him or her to write, teach or speak publicly in a private capacity – the perception will inevitably be otherwise. Such conflicts must be faced for what they are, and managed to avoid the unhelpful perception. Again, the interests of the archive will be paramount.

Trustful personal relationships between an archivist and (say) collectors or suppliers are among the greatest rewards and obligations of an audiovisual archivist. Knowing that they are open to abuse, and that some will prefer to trust the individual rather than the institution, such relationships must be characterised by absolute honesty, institutional loyalty and the absence of personal gain. Real dilemmas can result: for example, where gifts and mementos are offered to the archivist with the best of intentions, and it is necessary to avoid hurt or offence. In such cases, an archivist must work through the situation with a supervisor.

Personal conduct

The conscientious carrying out of a task to professional standards is ultimately a matter of personal honour and probity. Many tasks, such as the careful handling of collection material so as to avoid damage, are reliant on this: mistakes or damage, if not promptly reported and dealt with, may not be discovered for years.

In the course of daily work, archivists accrue a considerable amount of confidential information. This may range, for example, from the contents of a private collection which the owner does not want publicly known, to confidences revealed in an oral history recording to which public access is restricted. Such confidentiality must be respected without exception.

Neither collection material nor the general resources of an archive should be appropriated for private use or benefit, even though as a staff member it may be easy for an archivist to do this. This matters as much for the actual benefit as for the messages it sends: there is no justifiable basis on which staff should have privileged use of public property.

Audiovisual archivists recognise and observe cultural and moral responsibility towards indigenous people, observing the requirement that relevant collection material is handled and accessed in ways compatible with the norms of their cultures. Often the only person who will know whether these requirements are being observed is the archivist: it is a matter of personal integrity.

As guardians of the audiovisual heritage, archivists respect the integrity of the works in their care. They do not mutilate or censor them, misrepresent them, improperly suppress access to them nor in any other way attempt to falsify history or limit access to the unadorned record. They resist the efforts of others to do so. They hold in tension their personal tastes, values and critical judgements against the need to responsibly protect and develop their collection in accordance with policy.

The issues are fundamental and complex. On the one hand, the legitimate rights of copyright holders and community groups (such as indigenous peoples) to exercise fair controls over access and use must be honoured; on the other hand, censorship and access control can take many insidious forms - in the interests of political correctness, economic advantage or otherwise.¹⁸

Every sizeable audiovisual archive collection probably contains enough material to offend everyone!

Almost certainly, archivists will not share the values, moral standards and viewpoints inherent in at least *some* items in their collection. But racism, sexism, paternalism, immorality, violence, stereotyping and the rest are facts of human history, and they are evident in the products of society, including audiovisual products! The question is: by giving access to this item, am I endorsing - or perceived as endorsing - the values it contains? Or am I endorsing the right to access?

Dilemmas and disobedience¹⁹

Noam Chomsky commented “there is no reason to accept the doctrines crafted to sustain power and privilege, or to believe that we are constrained by mysterious and unknown social laws. These are simply decisions made within institutions that are subject to human will and that must face the test of legitimacy. And if they do not meet the test, they can be replaced by other institutions that are more free and more just, as has happened often in the past.”

Occasions will arise where an archivist finds a conflict between what he or she is instructed to do on the one hand, and considers responsible and ethical on the other. There are many possible scenarios: political censorship (“destroy this: it never happened”), economic pressure (“we can’t afford to keep all this stuff: get rid of it”), strategic choices, arbitrary and uninformed directives, discouraging or suppressing access to “politically incorrect” or “inconvenient” material, and so on. Or a particular state of affairs may exist in the archive which an individual considers so wrong or potentially damaging to the institution that it must be exposed, and he or she must consider becoming a “whistleblower”.

Such decisions are among the hardest dilemmas an archivist can face. One might say that the right solution is to discern the highest of the competing principles and serve it (for example, perhaps the saving of threatened collection material is the highest principle in a given situation.) But the situation may be complex, the choices not clear cut, and disobedience or whistleblowing may have serious personal consequences which have to be carefully weighed. Moreover, none of us is impartial.

There is no facile answer, but there are some logical steps to take. Analysing the situation to discern the rights, motives and assumptions of all the interested parties can help clarify one’s own motives and concerns. Blind obedience and going with the flow is always the easiest course but, as history shows, it is often the wrong one. What is the real agenda? What self-interest is involved (including my own)? Am I deceiving anyone or covering up? Do I know the right answer but don’t want to face it?

Having done this, one can try to weigh the competing claims in the circumstances. The boundary between right and wrong may be blurred. There may be no ‘good’ outcome: just a choice between differing evils, based on the information available.

Testing one’s conclusions with respected colleagues or friends can help to clarify the issues. Sometimes others can see a situation more clearly and dispassionately and perhaps see new angles to it. Sometimes a creative win/win solution will become apparent. Sometimes it will not.

Finally, in the light of these self-accountable steps, one must pay heed to one’s conscience. Trusting one’s own better judgment and ‘gut feeling’ when circumstances don’t affirm it is difficult; it is easier to

rationalise nagging doubts. Even then there's no certainty: two archivists facing the same dilemma, and weighing the same issues with the same rigour, can rightly and sincerely get different answers. We are all subjective beings, seeking what is right for us. We can only ask: as professionals, what outcome could *I* live with? What outcome is *unacceptable to me*?

Governance and autonomy

Finally I want to turn to the character of our archival institutions and the assumptions on which they work. What are the standards we have to defend?

In most countries the governance structure of companies, charities and other non-government entities must conform to legislated requirements concerning accountability, transparency, autonomy and competent administration. Governance documents define the organisation's objectives, powers and basic structure. Ultimate authority and accountability normally rests with a board or council of some kind which represents the stakeholders in the organisation.

Collecting institutions in the public sector desirably have equivalent arrangements. Typically, for example, national libraries, museums and archives will have their mandates, powers and character defined by a legal instrument – an act of parliament or equivalent – in which the governance arrangements are also defined. This makes the institutions accountable to public authority on the one hand, but correspondingly secure and professionally autonomous in the discharge of their mandate on the other. The arrangements may include such things as legal deposit provisions, which place a specific public responsibility and measure of recognition on the institution. At other levels – for instance in the case of university libraries or archives – there may be equivalent documented arrangements under the supreme authority, which in this case would be the senate or other governing entity of the university.

Perhaps because of the relative youth of the movement, audiovisual archives mostly exist in less defined and less secure circumstances, and it is a weakness. Relatively few enjoy a comparable level of legal recognition or autonomy at the national level. A number exist and operate essentially at the whim of the larger authority or entity to which they belong, and ultimately have little or no guarantee of professional autonomy. Most non-profit archives sit somewhere between these two poles. For-profit archives, of course, are normally parts of larger commercial entities and are subject to the governance arrangements of those entities. This means they may ultimately have little real autonomy.

The desirable minimum: semi autonomy

Given that the governance arrangements for many audiovisual archives are less than ideal, is there list of basic essentials? Until recently, FIAF statutes and rules required a high degree of organisational autonomy as a precondition for membership. In 2000 this stance was softened somewhat and the focus turned towards formal commitment to a new Code of Ethics by each member archive. Nevertheless, membership applicants must still provide considerable information to demonstrate the degree of professional autonomy which they enjoy. And why is it so? Experience suggests a number of minimum requirements.

The archive must exist as a recognisable entity. It has a self-explanatory name, a physical place, an organisation structure, staff, a collection, an infrastructure of fittings and equipment. It also has an organisational status, whether as a legal entity in its own right, or a division or program of a larger entity. Without these fundamentals, supporters have nothing concrete to relate to.

The archive has publicly promulgated governance documents which define its character, purpose, mandate, status and accountability. These are a reference point of good faith for users, supporters and staff. These are issued by and/or carry the weight of its highest authority (parliament, corporate board, council, university senate etc.)

It also has publicly promulgated, written policies which define at least its collection development, preservation and access activities. These are based on the governance documents, and are regularly tested and updated, as circumstances change, in consultation with staff and stakeholders. Policies are *observed in practice* and the archive's work is reported and accounted for against them. Without a policy-driven culture there is the risk that the archive will develop and manage its collection in arbitrary and unaccountable ways.

The archive has control of the development and management of its own collection. Its professional judgement in selection, acquisition, description, preservation activity and access provision is final and is not overridden by any higher authority. Without this surety, supporters can have no confidence that professional standards will be observed.

It is represented by its own staff in dealings with its stakeholders, including the media industries, other collecting institutions and national and international professional forums. It has direct access, and desirably reports directly, to the Board or the Chief Executive Officer of any larger organisation of which it is part. This is essential for clarity of communication and its capacity to relate to professional peers and stakeholders.

It has a written, publicly available ethical and philosophical base, whether this be a declared adherence to existing professional codes and statements, or those of its own creation. Supporters and staff alike have a right to be aware of the guiding values on which the archive operates, and for which it can be held accountable.

It has "arms length" funding – its working priorities are determined by internal professional judgements and not by external sponsors, authorities or a parent organisation. (This is admittedly difficult to achieve in an environment where the archive may be dependent on many funding sources, sponsors and grant-giving bodies who may impose their own conditions and priorities.)

If it is not governed by its own executive board or council, it at least has an effective representative advisory body, or equivalent consultative mechanism, through which it can be kept attuned to the views and needs of its constituency and maintain the confidence of its support base.

The archive is led by a director or executive team with a professional background in the audiovisual archiving field. This ensures that the archive is managed from an appropriate frame of reference.

...and beyond

In an ideal situation an archive would have some additional characteristics guaranteeing its autonomy, continuity and viability.

It would have a separate legal personality as defined by an act of the legislature, a constitution, a charter, articles of association or some equivalent document. Such a document would provide the best guarantee of continuity, stability and accountable governance. If thoughtfully devised, such documents can go a long

way to ensuring that the governing board or council is made up of appropriately skilled and representative individuals and that the collection is protected by “perpetual succession” – if the archive ceases to exist as an organisation a like-minded body assumes custody of its collection.

Secure, arms-length funding which is both adequate and disposable at the complete professional discretion of the archive is certainly desirable and an ideal, if in practice probably unattainable. Canadian archivist Sam Kula put it more picturesquely: “ ‘Give me the money and get the hell out of the way!’ might make a great button but it will probably not go over too well in the corridors of power.”²⁰ But an archive which can secure the bulk of its funding on these terms from government authorities, and top it up with other sponsorship and grant funds with conditions attached, many come close to the ideal.

To have complete professional freedom to set and implement policy is likewise an ideal. Though many institutions may like to feel that they have this freedom, the reality too often is that it is easy to promulgate a policy, but its implementation may have many unspoken strings attached to it, and what is proclaimed is not always what is observed in practice.

Power

It perhaps comes naturally for archivists to think of themselves as relatively powerless: at the mercy of governments and bureaucracies, or of huge industrial organisations whose strategic decisions, made on a larger canvas with scant regard for archival consequences, will constantly re-shape their tasks and add to their challenges. Yet audiovisual archivists – like other collecting professionals – exercise a profound power and responsibility in society.

They are the keepers, the ‘archons’, of the world’s memory. Ultimately they define the places, institutions and structures in which it is kept. They make life or death choices about what shall be saved or discarded. They decide timing and the form in which it will survive. They are the custodians of the memory – the guardians who keep watch over its well being and its viability. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the word *archive* has its origin in the Greek *archeion* (the office of the magistrate or *archon*). The *archon’s* control of records legitimised his power.

As Jacques Derrida says: “the archive doesn’t consist simply in remembering, in living memory, in anamnesis; but in consigning, in inscribing a trace to some external location – there is no archive without some location, that is, some space outside. Archive is not a living memory. It’s a location – that’s why the political power of the archons is so essential in the definition of the archive. So that you need the exteriority of the place in order to get something archived”²¹

It is the keepers also who determine the accessibility of the memory; the way it is organised and kept; the form and quality of the cataloguing and other records by which access will be gained; the priorities assigned to this work; the choice of what is promoted or suppressed, and how it is presented.

The memory resides not just in things, but in people.....the creators, the distributors, the technicians, the entrepreneurs, then administrators, the researchers and historians, the archivists themselves. They determine what oral histories will be recorded, what relationships maintained, what information is important.

Not everyone will passively accept the way archivists and collecting professionals exercise their power. The Nazis publicly burned the world’s great books and no power stopped them. China’s Cultural

Revolution sought to expunge the influence of external knowledge and thought. Cambodia's Khmer Rouge sought to exterminate memory predating their "year zero", just as the Taliban set out to destroy the cultural memory of a nation. At great risk, the 'archons' resorted to subterfuge to frustrate them - and their power prevailed. Today politicians and bureaucrats have their own reasons for exerting their power over survival and access and we are witness to that.

In any archive, power relationships operate internally as well as externally and not always in ethical ways. The challenge for audiovisual archivists is to understand their power and to use it ethically – for the good of society, their fellow professionals and the world's memory.

Conclusion

Back on the 20th of February 1897, a journalist writing London's Westminster Gazette had this to say about the importance of film archiving:

..the ordinary work of the print-room of the British Museum is quite disorganised by the collection of animated photographs that have been pouring in upon the bewildered officials ...the degradation of the room consecrated to Durer, Rembrandt and the other masters... [in which the staff] unwillingly catalogue "The Prince's Derby", "The Beach at Brighton", "The Buses of Whitehall", and the other attractive scenes that delight the great heart of the music-hall public.... seriously, does not the collection of rubbish become a trifle absurd?

Barely three years later, on 1 January 1901, when the Australian colonies federated to create the nation of Australia as we now know it, the authorities commissioned the making of a film record of the ceremonies in Sydney – expressly for archival purposes. It was the first time a nation had been born in front of a movie camera, and miraculously most of the film still survives.

We still live with the dichotomy of these two perceptions. How well are we reshaping the values of the former, and managing the expectations and trust inherent in the latter?

¹ Cases in point are Britain's National Film and Television Archive and Australia's National Film and Sound Archive. For more information go to www.filarchiveaction.org and www.afiresearch.rmit.edu.au/archiveforum respectively.

² 'Books can not be killed by fire. People die, but books never die. No man and no force can abolish memory..... In this war, we know, books are weapons. And it is a part of your dedication always to make them weapons for man's freedom.' Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Message to the booksellers of America*, 6 May 1942

³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive fever: a Freudian impression*, University of Chicago Press, 1996,p.4,n. 1

⁴ The author's reference sources in this section include *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1951), *The Macquarie Dictionary* (1988), *The Oxford paperback Spanish Dictionary* (1993), *Roget's Thesaurus* (1953). Adrian Cunningham's essay on 'Archival institutions' in *Recordkeeping in Society* (ed. Michael Piggott et al, 2004, Wagga Wagga, Charles Sturt University Press) traces the growth of the concept since the dawn of recorded history.

⁵ The author gratefully acknowledges Karen F Gracy's doctoral dissertation *The imperative to preserve: competing definitions of value in the world of film preservation* (University of California, Los Angeles, 2001) and especially its extended discussion on the definition of the term 'preservation'

⁶ Ironically this may arise from a campaign by film archives, in an earlier era, to sensitise the public with a strong and simple message that the only way to preserve (i.e. save) threatened nitrate film was to copy it to acetate-based film: “nitrate won’t wait”. While a valid and effective cry at the time, we now know the truth to be more complex – and correspondingly harder to communicate. Old ideas die hard.

⁷ *This Film is Dangerous*, ed. Roger Smither and Catherine A Surowiec (Brussels, FIAF, 2002) is a 700-page compendium on all aspects of nitrate film, and to date the definitive reference work on the subject.

⁸ See also the fuller definition of a **document** in *Memory of the World/ General Guidelines to Safeguard Documentary Heritage* (UNESCO, Paris, 2002), section 2.6

⁹ *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939, directed by Victor Fleming. *Los Olvidados*, 1950, directed by Luis Bunuel

¹⁰ The reader’s attention is drawn to the UNESCO *Charter and Guidelines* on the preservation of digital heritage (www.unesco.org/webworld/mdm.....)

¹¹ A challenging, some have said chilling, analysis of digitisation and the future of film preservation is found in Paulo Cherchi Usai’s book *The death of cinema: history, cultural memory and the digital dark age* (London, British Film Institute, 2001)

¹² Walter Benjamin, *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* as quoted by Julian H.Scaff in *Art and authenticity in the age of digital reproduction*. (http://pixels.filmtv.ucla.edu/gallery/web/julian_scaff/benjamin/benjamin1.html) The concepts of “original”, “copy”, “surrogate” and “simulacrum” have been explored in the writings of Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard and others.

¹³ The websites of ICOM (www.icom.org), ICA (www.ica.org) and IFLA (www.ifla.org) offer both international codes, and the codes of national associations in the museum, archives and library fields.

¹⁴ See www.fiafnet.org/uk/members/ethics.cfm

¹⁵ *You only live once: on being a troublemaking professional* (in *The Moving Image*, Vol 2 No 1, Spring 2002 pp 175-184) Whistleblowers Australia (www.whistleblowers.org.au) is one of many organisations documenting case studies.

¹⁶ The UNESCO *Memory of the World* publication, *Lost memory - libraries and archives destroyed in the twentieth century* (1996) makes devastating reading. Recent South African experience in the politics of archival preservation and access is documented in Verne Harris’ essay, *The archive is politics: truths, powers, records and contestation in South Africa*, keynote address at the conference ‘Political pressure and the archival record’, University of Liverpool, Liverpool (UK), July 2003

¹⁷ Judith M Panitch: *Liberty, equality, posterity? Some archival lessons from the case of the French Revolution* in *American Archivist*, vol 59, Winter 1996, p 47

¹⁸ For an exploration of these and related issues, see Roger Smither’s article *Dealing with the unacceptable* in FIAF Bulletin #45, October 1992.

¹⁹ In drafting this section I am indebted to Verne Harris’s article *Knowing right from wrong: the archivist and the protection of people’s rights* in *Janus*, issue 1999.1, pp 32-38. and commend it to readers for a larger exploration of this topic.

²⁰ *AMIA Newsletter #61, Summer 2003, page 2*

²¹ Jacques Derrida: *Archive fever in South Africa* in Carolyn Hamilton et al, *Refiguring the archive* (David Philip, Cape Town, 2002).