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YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE: On being a troublemaking professional

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Every society honours its live conformists and its dead troublemakers Mignon McLaughlin

A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches Proverbs 22.1

Taking my cue from Sam Kula's "mea culpa" in the first issue, I've been reflecting on some professional dilemmas, past and present, faced during my recently completed 33 year career in what is best known as Australia's National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA)¹. In part, this is preparation for working on a personal history² of the Archive. In part, it is to answer some questions put to me by various colleagues in recent years.

Our profession now has the maturity to support its own university-level training courses, a professional philosophy, recognised codes of ethics, and a sense of identity. These things have come relatively late to us, but they have better codified our responsibilities as audiovisual archivists. They encompass not only our personal behaviour as professionals, in relation to collections and colleagues, but also their logical consequence – our responsibility to look beyond ourselves and to influence the organisational structures (our archives) and their operating environments. Here, too, our professionalism in defending principles and perspectives which may be in tune with our own values, but at odds with those of our employers, patrons or the wider world, can be tested.

For example, we can be faced with the dilemma of choosing the least worst of uninviting alternatives, of weighing the pros and cons when charting a course through shades of grey with no black and white alternatives, or of choosing a harder course instead of the line of least resistance, perhaps even at personal risk. We may not seek these challenges: they may confront us.

Perhaps you have heard the unconfirmed accounts of librarians who, during the Cultural Revolution in China, deliberately disarranged their collections so that zealous red guards would not be able to find and destroy precious materials. During the Soviet era in Eastern Europe, when history was what the ruling regime said it was, there were audiovisual archivists who hid material they had been ordered to destroy, bringing it back to light when conditions had changed. And, of course, Henri Langlois' strategy of dispersing and hiding the collection of the *Cinematheque Francaise* during the Nazi occupation of Paris is the stuff of legend.

¹ Throughout this article, for reasons that will become obvious, I have used convention of referring to the institution by the name adopted in 1984, and by its diminutives NFSA and "the Archive".

² The "official" history, by definition, will have to be written by a non-player balancing several points of view.

While hardly a risk worthy of comparison, I vividly recall around 1970 my growing concern, as a young archivist, that not only films but also old film posters should be preserved. At the time, the embryonic *National Film Archive* was part of the *National Library of Australia* (NLA), and in the collecting climate of the time, no one was particularly worrying about such ephemera. So I did something unilateral: I began quietly accepting donations when offered, secreting the growing poster collection behind the false wall in the screening room, and waiting for the propitious moment to raise the subject - and have my actions, as it were, retrospectively endorsed. Fortunately the moment arrived, and they were.

With that introduction, I would like to take you through three events or “case studies.” Each was a turning point in the Archive’s history, and in each some personal professional choices were necessary. Whether you agree or disagree with my choices is not the point: by definition, they were personal decisions and someone else may have chosen differently. But they highlight the kinds of the recurrent dilemmas we face as professional audiovisual archivists.

The first “case study” came in the second half of 1973. For decades, the archival work has been a spare time occupation for one or two of the staff engaged in running the NLA’s 16mm film lending library. Now a distinct staff unit of seven people was being established under my charge to run what was to become known as the *National Film Archive*.

After more than four years at the NLA I had long since realised, through growing contact with FIAF (*International Federation of Film Archives*) members, how little I really knew, and how severely limited was Australia’s film archiving capability. I realised I was not going to learn much about the field without visiting its key exponents overseas. Through long correspondence with several FIAF members – helped by the personal encouragement of the legendary Ernest Lindgren of Britain’s *National Film Archive* – I had worked out an itinerary, beginning in London and including the first FIAF Summer School, hosted by the *Staatliches Filmarchiv* in East Berlin.

Since the NLA could never fund such extensive travel by a junior officer I had sought the money elsewhere. I was unsuccessful at first, until Jerzy Toeplitz, a former president of FIAF who had just been installed as head of the new *Australian Film and Television School* (FTS), came to the rescue. The School funded me in my personal capacity for a five-month study tour of more than a dozen archives in Europe and North America³. It was my first overseas trip, and this country cousin from the Antipodes found it a revelation.

On my return, I had to honour my commitment to FTS to present a report on the trip containing my observations. I wanted to do this thoroughly, and took a week’s vacation to get it started. By August 1974 it was almost complete, and had become a *magnum opus* of some 170 pages⁴. I had formed some clear views about how the

³ Under the Public Service rules of the time, the NLA was required to continue paying my salary for the duration of the trip.

⁴ *A Study of Film Archives in England, Europe and the USA*, August 1974, copyright *Australian Film and Television School*.

work should develop in Australia, including the conviction, which by no means originated with me, that Australia needed an organisationally autonomous national film archive, properly financed and equipped, and separate from the NLA. I felt the needs of the work itself, and the importance of the film heritage, should be recognised in its own right, on the standard pattern mandated by FIAF. I felt I should not allow institutional politics to hide such views.

At this point the NLA management, aware of my opinions and clearly worried about what I might be writing, asked to vet the report before I submitted it to the FTS. This seemed inconsistent with my obligation and when I asked him, Jerzy Toeplitz was of the same view. He did agree that I could give the NLA a copy *at the same time* I submitted it to him. I did this, whereupon the NLA management reacted in two ways: firstly, by informing me that I had damaged my career prospects by expressing my views, and secondly by preparing a submission to the NLA Council negating many of my observations. The first came promptly. The second I was never told about, only discovering it by accident years later.

The professional challenge I faced was whether to be completely honest about my observations, or whether to water them down with one eye over my shoulder on the potential reaction of the NLA. I felt I had no option but to choose the former. Whether I was naïve in doing so, I don't know; whether I would have been equally outspoken in later years, as a seasoned bureaucrat more experienced in the arts of presenting information, I also don't know. Certainly, in the internal politics of the institution, there was a price to pay: I was now a person with "disloyal" ideas, and from that point on I knew I was treated differently⁵. But I had made my choice.

So much for the internal reaction. What I did not anticipate was the external response. Jerzy Toeplitz was well pleased with the report. And so, it seemed, were others. In short order, the FTS told me, they had received requests for about 20 complete photocopies of the report (which they fulfilled) and the journal *Cinema Papers* commissioned film historian Ross Cooper to do a précis, which was published in its issue of December 1974. My recommendations were now well and truly out in the open, and the following year an activist group, the *Association for a National Film and Television Archive*, was formed. So began a decade of discussion, lobbying, committees and reports, which ultimately led, in 1984, to the creation of the NFSA and its separation from the NLA.

Did my report trigger this reaction? If so, why? I can't definitively answer either question. I can only speculate that it proved to be the right thing at the right time. I suspect that, unwittingly, I was the first person to make an assessment of the Australian situation against a detailed international frame of reference, and it crystallised long held but unfocussed concerns in the film community. If I had written a report with, let us say, more ambivalence and less frankness, would it have had the same effect? I don't know. But I have never regretted taking the course I did: and it has been a cause of satisfaction that most of the recommendations I made in 1974 have since been fulfilled. Most. Not all.

⁵ I was to learn that I was not alone in that category, which I found included some of the NLA's brightest and best. But that's another story.

What I had observed on my trip fed directly into the systems and methods which the new Archive unit was setting up. On a small scale we were able to “departmentalise” functions on the European/American pattern and encourage people to specialise in areas like documentation, preservation and acquisition. Collection growth accelerated: so did its use by a resurgent film and television industry hitting its stride, to whom it became an increasingly important partner and resource. Conventions like the idea of voluntary deposit of negatives by film makers were established. Projects like *The Last Film Search* widened public and political awareness of the magnitude of the Archive’s task. That was important for what came next.

Dissolve to mid-1983 and the second “case study”. By this time, the future of the *National Film Archive*, and its continued attachment to the NLA, had become a matter of detailed study and debate by Government agencies and film industry bodies. The NLA and the library community strongly opposed its separation: the Archive’s constituency – the film and TV community, academics, users and supporters generally - strongly favoured it. It was not just a question of resources: it was also the question of whether a book library was any longer an appropriate setting for such an entity. By this time, I was Director of the NLA’s Film Section, which comprised both the *National Film Lending Collection* (by now the largest public 16mm film and video lending library in the country) and the Archive. Comments were getting into the media and I knew that issues were coming to a head. I also knew that I soon had to choose whether to duck the question of autonomy, or nail my colours to the mast. People in the film community, while recognising the protocols under which public servants worked, nonetheless made it clear to me that the time had come to speak up publicly. It proved a dilemma of a different order to the one I faced in 1974.

My deputy, Mike Lynskey, and I briefed a journalist, Fia Cumming, who had previously written good stories about our activities and kept asking for new ones. Fia’s article, *Film rescued but archive in trouble*, appeared in the 16 August 1983 issue of *The Bulletin*, a national news magazine. Mike and I were extensively quoted, and we knew we were burning our bridges. We broke no rules, but we did break etiquette and protocol. Among other things, I affirmed the need for the Archive to be separated from the NLA – noting that “at the stroke of a pen, we can be wiped off the map if the National Library decides to reorganise itself”.

The horse had bolted. The media now pursued the issue with a vengeance, and within a month it was being debated in Parliament. Most sentiment supported separation: but a few journalists favoured retention by the NLA, making dark allusions to “sinister, ruthless and exploitative” methods and unidentified “sectional interests” wanting to take over the Archive for their own ends, and to ambitious staff members who wanted “power and plum jobs” in the new institution⁶. The *Canberra Times* editorialised that “establishing a new body would be wasteful and very likely harmful to the national interest”.⁷

Another twist was soon to be added. I learned, after the event, that Prime Minister Bob Hawke had read Fia Cumming’s article of 16 August the day it was published, and had asked his principal adviser, Bob Hogg, to pursue the matter. I will here cut

⁶ Inter alia, *Film, sound archives in state of siege* (*Canberra Times*, 16 November 1983, p.30), *National Film Archive in Jeopardy* (*InCite*, 14 October 1983, front page)

⁷ *Preserving records*, editorial in *Canberra Times*, 7 October 1983

short a very fraught and complex story (you'll have to buy the book or see the movie) by simply noting that Bob Hogg pursued it with vigour. In the course of this, in what proved to be a prescient move, the future of the NLA's sound archive became linked to the film archive⁸. The outcome was that the Arts Minister, Barry Cohen announced the creation of the *National Film and Sound Archive* in Parliament, on 5 April 1984. At the same time he also announced the setting up of two committees, one of which ultimately produced the "grand plan" for the Archive, *Time in our hands*, in November 1985.

Throughout the events of 1983 and 1984 I faced many ethical questions. Was I being disloyal to my employer (and who was my employer – the NLA or the Australian Government)? Was my ultimate loyalty to the Government and the Australian people? Or to the film community and the rest of the Archive's constituency? Was I putting the future of my staff at risk? Should I, or should I not, involve them? Should I give advice to my Minister as he sought it from me, without first clearing it with my Director General? Etc? I sought guidance from senior friends in the bureaucracy. This was helpful, but none of it answered to the whole situation. I felt alone, and with my wife, who shared the traumatic months with me, I just had to make the best choices I could, step by step.

Today we would call this "whistleblowing", and now there are organisations, codes of ethics, ombudsmen and legislation designed, at least in theory, to protect employees of public authorities who call attention to an unsatisfactory state of affairs. There was no word for it then, much less legislation or due process. I would not want to relive the experience. I have often wondered if the same outcome could have been achieved with less angst and trauma. I doubt it. Sometimes, nervous and ill prepared, we find ourselves in the arena, and our professionalism is put to the test. We have to handle the metaphorical lions, and we may come off a bit the worse for wear. We can only try to be sure of our motives, and act with integrity as best we see the issues.

The dire predictions about the future of the Archive proved unfounded, of course. In 17 years the staff of the NFSA has grown from 15 to around 220, and with a budget to match. Following the events of 1983 and 1984, I found affirmation in the feedback from colleagues, Ministers, the constituency, and in the outcome itself: the steady development of the Archive to an extent that would never have been possible within the culture and priorities of the NLA (a statement which is not, by the way, a criticism). In fact, some of that affirmation came as recently as my retirement in April this year, and I particularly treasure a gracious note from a senior public servant who was a member of the NLA Council at the time of the split. He explained that he had opposed the separation of the Archive then, but in retrospect believed it had proved the right decision.

The night of 3 October 1984 was the gala official opening of the NFSA in its new⁹ headquarters, the honours performed by Prime Minister Bob Hawke – ably assisted by actor Max Gillies, doing his celebrated impersonation of ... Bob Hawke! It was an

⁸ The sound archive had its own parallel history of activism, but the two operations were not linked within the NLA structure.

⁹ Actually "old" – the refurbished home of the former *Australian Institute of Anatomy*, one of Canberra's architectural treasures. The Cabinet decision creating the NFSA required it to move out of the NLA building as soon as possible: it now had a physical identity of its own.

extraordinary occasion, televised, documented and spoken about for years afterwards. 750 guests sent in their RSVPs, 1500 turned up, and everyone was packed into space big enough for 500 – all in teeming rain! No one said so, but you sensed how much it was a celebration of victory: relished, like no event before or since, by an entire industry and community. After a decade and more of activism, Australia had at last made a major statement about the cultural importance of its audiovisual heritage. It had set up, potentially, as ideal a structure to care for it and represent it as could be devised. The *National Film and Sound Archive* put Australia unequivocally on the map of the global AV archiving movement.

Now to scene three: the final “case study” is another gala evening. On 21 June 1999, some 500 guests assembled to mark the opening, by Prime Minister John Howard, of the Archive’s major extension to the old Institute of Anatomy building, doubling the size of its headquarters. First visualised in 1985 in *Time in our hands*, the extension had been a long time coming, but now the Archive was physically complete in its primary home. The honours were done, the ribbon was cut, but the main event was yet to come.

For the guests were then told that the Archive had a new name. It was a double title: the marketing name would be *ScreenSound Australia* and the formal institutional name *The National Collection of Screen and Sound*. It was explained that the new identity was 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 21st century”.¹⁰ . . . But amid the polite applause, it was obvious that many did not comprehend what had just happened. It transpired that there was to be no managed transition from the old identity to the new: its accumulated equity was abandoned, and the NFSA’s well known kookaburra logo, recently emblazoned on glasswork throughout the new extension, was quietly scraped off while the evening was in progress. As they left, guests were given a letter thanking them for “joining us in celebrating the launch of ScreenSound Australia, the National Collection of Screen and Sound. We are now positioned for the future...”

The changes were purely cosmetic – an image makeover¹¹. The effects, however, were to be profound and unforeseen. As the news sank in over the following months, a constituency caught off balance, which had neither sought nor imagined change to an appropriate, familiar name, seemed to find little cause for celebration. Although a few liked the “sound” of *ScreenSound*, most reactions ranged from puzzlement to concern, even to outright laughter. Complaints and concerns flooded in¹² and the impression was soon gained that the changes had been devised hastily, with insufficient thought

¹⁰ “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...” (letter given to guests on 21 June 1999). The Foundation has not yet appeared.

¹¹ The equivalent, for example, of turning the *National Library of Australia* into *Books Australia*.

¹² The *Annual Review* for 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”. The *Review* does not, however, record the “rationale” communicated by staff. The *Friends of the National Film and Sound Archive* logged similar numbers of written complaints and comments in response to a survey. Beyond this, there were many informal complaints, comments in visitors’ books, and so on.

or consultation. Within the first year, the formal institutional title *National Collection of Screen and Sound* was twice changed – first back to *National Film and Sound Archive*, then to *National Screen and Sound Archive*. Product sales, after rising steadily for years, dropped by nearly half. The inherent limitations of the *ScreenSound* formula became clear from feedback¹³, while it also emerged that a new name which was supposed to be unique actually had other meanings¹⁴ and users¹⁵.

The change, the manner of its introduction, and the misjudgment of constituency reaction revealed how far the once close relationship between the Archive and its supporters had drifted in the 15 years between these events. A sense of dispossession and even anger was sufficiently palpable to result in the withholding of potential acquisitions or permission to access materials. Perhaps the most symbolic indicator was the setting up, in early 2000, of the deliberately named *Friends of the National Film and Sound Archive Inc.* Its advent echoed the creation of the original *Association for a National Film and Television Archive* in 1975. The *Friends* released a discussion paper and charter¹⁶ calling, among other things, for a renewal of closer ties between the Archive and its constituency. It successfully lobbied for the reinstatement of the word “archive” in the formal name of the institution.

To track the drama and dynamic of that year is too big a task for this article. But the larger issues emerging in its wake have universal relevance, even if I need to spell the details out in localised form. Let me describe them.

The first issue 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 Department¹⁷, 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 nominally 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 teacher¹⁸, as well as from its peers, the other national custodial institutions¹⁹. It appeared to “vacate the

¹³ Feedback to the *Friends*, published reactions, and comments made or reported to me, indicated that the term *ScreenSound* communicated no self-evident meaning, was not translatable, and hid the nature of the institution. It sounded slick and faddish, and suggested a commercial entity, not a public cultural institution, much less an archive. Some actually believed the Archive had been sold off to a multinational corporation. Many did not realise it was the same institution as the NFSA.

¹⁴ It is actually a technical term relating to sound track compilation and the projection of optical sound tracks on the screen. So *ScreenSound Australia* literally means “Sound Tracks Australia”.

¹⁵ *Screensound Pty Ltd* is a Sydney-based sound recording studio; the *Australian Screen Sound Guild* is a professional society for technicians, also headquartered in Sydney, and the *ScreenSound* is a sophisticated sound-mixing console, marketed internationally by Solid State Logic. A web search shows many users of the inversion, *SoundScreen*, with which *ScreenSound* is frequently confused.

¹⁶ Available from Shelley Clarke, *Friends NFSA*, e-mail: mercury3@ozemail.com.au

¹⁷ *Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA)*

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Self-descriptive institutional titles, which communicate country, status and professional descriptor, appear to be a standard international formula, eg. *National Museum of Australia*, *National Archives of*

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 official name, it has lost its pride of place to the promoted *ScreenSound* brand, a formula without obvious meaning or professional associations. The Archive’s primary public identity now proclaims no role or mission. Staff, constituency and the general public are therefore 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, and access to the Archive’s corporate heritage. The change creates a fracture, artificial but nevertheless real, in corporate continuity. Beginning with the media package released on 21 June 1999, history has been and is being rewritten as the new name is projected backwards in time - in corporate documents, policies, reports and elsewhere - simply because it becomes too hard to do anything else. Accurately celebrating the Archive’s history becomes tortuous and therefore less attractive. Yet preservation and presentation of the past with integrity is an ethical fundamental for archives: if they cannot be accurate about their own history, is there any assurance that they would be meticulous about other history?

The third issue relates to the security and continuity of the institution itself. Alone among Australia’s national custodial institutions, and contrary to the recommendation of *Time in our hands*, the NFSA is still not a legal entity: it remains a small division in a mega-department of state. It has no parliamentary charter or legislative base defining its role, nature, functions and status: the name *National Film and Sound Archive*, which asserted these things, was in fact its crucial public and professional guarantee of reliability and continuity. Having shown that the guarantee could be so lightly and unexpectedly discarded, it follows that the policies, the character, even the continued existence, of the institution are equally vulnerable. It could still disappear by a “stroke of the pen”, as threatened in 1983. Dropping the professional descriptor *archive* without explanation, and assuming the non-specific identity *ScreenSound* could only add to such fears. Names create their own logic and mythology over time, long after the circumstances of their adoption are forgotten.

The fourth issue concerns the transparency of informed debate and enquiry . Experience has now shown that it is hard to debate any aspect of the NFSA’s work without sooner or later coming back to the logic of its name. It is an issue of professional policy and philosophy on which open, public debate is as essential as on any other key policy matter. Yet the Archive’s own publications have reflected virtually nothing of the constituency’s questions and complaints, while many of those who have expressed views in private have good reason to be reluctant about going public. Reassurance is a precondition for genuine debate.

This leads to the fifth and most central issue, and the question I am most frequently asked: *why was it done?* The few official justifications for the change have been brief, inconsistent and incomplete. For example, the longest explanation published to

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.

date²⁰ is at odds on several points with the stance taken a year earlier. In the letter and press kit of 21 June 1999 the word *archive* has vanished, and a different formal name is put forward with the declaration that “we *are now* positioned for the future”²¹. Nor is there any mention of reaching “educational and youth markets”. These incongruities are not explained, nor is supporting evidence offered for the assertions made in the later statement. The market-speak (*branding, positioning*) in a policy position suggests its own logic. The explanations do not point to a larger statement of rationale, and I am not aware that one exists. Such an omission is unusual in an institution traditionally noted for its comprehensive policy base.

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 professional achievement: 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 a detailed rationale or explanatory paper on the name change is indispensable to its informed acceptance by the professional community. Such a paper would, *inter alia*, have to deal with the issues mentioned in this article.

On this third “case study” I faced personal choices in the before-and-after of the name change. I communicated my views internally in the appropriate way²² and had to work out a *modus vivendi* as the consequences unfolded, which is a common challenge for employees. Although my sense of unease actually cost me some nights’ sleep before the event (a sure sign of trying to rationalise one’s better judgement), I did not then realise all the implications, or the crucial importance of maintaining a self-explanatory public identity. It took months to understand their full import.

The central lesson, if indeed I need to summarise it, 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

²⁰ This item appeared in the Spring (September-November) 2000 issue of *News from the archive* under the heading *National Screen and Sound Archive* and is quoted in full:

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.

²¹ Author’s italics. The letter distributed to guests at the 21 June event suggested long preparation leading to a carefully devised identity presented in final form.

²² In discussing this “case study” I have confined myself to information that is published or otherwise non-confidential.

can be powerful and precious, and they carry a wealth of meaning, symbolism and associations. It was Shakespeare who famously said: “he that filches from me my good name/ robs me of that which not enriches him/ and makes me poor indeed.”²³

It is my assessment, more than two years after the event, that the renaming has not achieved universal respect or acceptance, and is unlikely to do so because of its inherent limitations. Multiple names for the same institution seem to confuse rather than clarify identity²⁴. To my knowledge, the NFSA approach has not been copied by other archives.²⁵ If there are net benefits of the change they are still unclear; the costs, including the effect on credibility and supporter goodwill, have been significant. Whether one regards the name change as a success, a mistake or an experiment, it is an experience to ponder. Moreover, this state of affairs is self-imposed: one might ruefully observe that audiovisual archiving is hard enough at the best of times without needing to add self-made dilemmas.

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And so to the current dilemma for me - and others. What name do I use for my national archive?

Until mid-1999, the NFSA had a focussed, self-explanatory name that was universally accepted. Now it is known by three names: its original title and the two current official ones, with their respective diminutives. All three are sometimes used at the same conferences, seminars or meetings. The situation is further confused by the ambivalence with which they are presented²⁶ and the divisions and tensions which have been generated in the Archive’s constituency by making it difficult *not* to align with the term *ScreenSound*: publicity, correspondence, services and normal business are built around it. Nonetheless, some supporters deliberately choose to identify with the original name or current formal name, and I am aware of many individuals who, like me, do so as a professional statement, to avoid implied endorsement of the *ScreenSound* formula. Sadly, this now limits their ability to promote the Archive.

In writing this article I have chosen to open up to the global profession an important matter of which it is aware but not informed. Some may feel it improper for me to comment on events which transpired during my recent employment. On the other hand, there is probably no other person in a position to knowledgeably break the ice, and I feel an obligation to colleagues and supporters of the Archive who cannot do so. The NFSA is a widely known institution in which I, and, I believe, Australians

²³ *Othello* III. iii. 153

²⁴ I except, of course, acronyms (like NFSA) which by definition point to the actual name, and familiar shorthands (like “the Archive”) which often arise informally.

²⁵ ...or by the NFSA’s nearest neighbour. “The council of the National Museum of Australia has rejected suggestions from consultants that it “brand” itself by adopting an Aboriginal or other name... council chairman Tony Staley said ‘...the overwhelming view of the council was that we’ve got a great name and it must go on being the name’” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September 2000.

²⁶ The official title, *National Screen and Sound Archive*, is mainly used as an explanatory tag line. It is rarely presented in its own right, or its status made clear: it won’t be found in the phone directory, for example. The descriptor *archive*, while it is back, is now in a subordinate position: *ScreenSound Australia* is the promoted identity. While it is nominally an abbreviation of the official title, few seem to realise this, perhaps because it does not look like an abbreviation.

generally, rightly take pride. These events are part of its history. Most importantly, it is the issues, not the institution itself, on which I am commenting.

Having taken a long view of the NFSA's past, I now look to its future, noting two things I believe need to happen. First, the recovery of a single, self-explanatory name as its public identity. I see no good reason why it should not revert to the historic name it was given in 1984, which – because it has substance, stature and logic – remains familiar and popular, its loss still constantly regretted in my hearing. Second, protection of its future, and its character, role and collections, by the passage of an Act of Parliament to give it legal existence, and the same statutory authority status as its peers, such as the *National Library of Australia* and *National Museum of Australia*. This was recommended in 1985 in *Time in our hands*. It was recommended earlier, too, in my 1974 report. It is long overdue.

Finally, I return to the question of the dilemmas we all face as professionals daily trying to make the best, or sometimes the least worst, choices we can, in the less than perfect institutions which we create and inhabit. We need the intellectual rigour to create and apply policies and philosophies with integrity. We need the openness to encourage debate and constructive criticism, recognising that, even if it is painful, the profession and our archives can only grow by it. We need codes of ethics, but also the discernment to apply them in unforeseen circumstances. We need the vision to think beyond our comfort zones, to influence our settings and structures so we may better achieve our mission to protect the world's AV heritage.

We also need, if I can borrow a line from a current movie²⁷, “passion and the courage of conviction”. It is these qualities that drive all else, that make us troublemakers rather than conformists! It doesn't mean we won't make mistakes, but it does mean that as professionals we believe in and accept a certain personal responsibility for changing the world a little bit... and for handling the dilemmas that go with the territory.

Disclaimer

This article is written in a strictly personal capacity and the opinions expressed are the author's alone: they do not necessarily reflect the views of any organisation with which he is associated.

²⁷ Reese Witherspoon's final speech in *Legally Blonde*.