Applicable Models for Audiovisual Archives and Collections: Engagement With Indigenous Communities and Archival Materials

Josephine McRobbie

Introduction

From intellectual property and repatriation of materials to tribes, to the access restriction of recordings of sacred and secret Aboriginal practices, to public exhibition decisions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage is an emergent site of power negotiation and cultural representation in museums and archives, and leads to many practical concerns for the management of archives and libraries. The disenfranchisement that Indigenous populations have historically faced, and continue to contend with, make archives a potent arena for negotiating rights, representation, and advocacy. Archives offer materials that serve many positive functions, as vital evidence in land rights cases, tools for endangered language learning, and engagement with genealogy and community history. However, archival collections and practices carry with them a complex legacy of ethnocentrism and cultural oppression. For example, institutions hold collections that were collected unethically or under duress to Native populations, as well as recordings or documentation of traditional practices or rituals that should only be accessible to certain members of communities. The interpretation of these materials is a sensitive issue that leads to curatorial and preservation roadblocks.

How do audiovisual archives and libraries approach collections about Indigenous groups and outreach to Indigenous communities when faced with a complex web of institutional priorities and needs ranging from promotion to technical preservation to safeguarding of cultural heritage?

This report examines several models of engagement with Indigenous communities and audio-visual materials from case studies performed at three Australian institutions – the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), and the National Library of Australia (NLA) – and draws from these examples a number of common challenges and best practices. Finally, this report suggests some ways in which these experiences may be applied to smaller institutions that hope to equitably engage with and safeguard Indigenous culture and history. This report is a broad overview of applicable models, however, for deeper engagement with any of these issues, please refer to the Suggested Reading / Resources section at the end of the document.

In my own professional and graduate positions, I have worked with both formally and informally defined collections, ranging from "archived" public media productions to ethnographic recordings at a folklife organization to a 80,000-plus item film archive, as well as a large-scale audio and video digitization consulting project. The latter was the impetus for this

project, as I considered the challenges for small audio-visual material holding units to approach minority and Indigenous representation. Small, underfunded libraries, archives, or cultural institutions are in a difficult position of holding materials that may be in need of specialized approaches and workflows, but many certainly don't have the ability or funding to focus on these issues.

I was interested in visiting institutions that are well funded (at least, in contrast to smaller institutions) and able to approach Indigenous representation in the A/V archive not only reactively, but proactively, as a part of their key mission. From this, I hoped to come away with a basic reflection on key best practices that could be referred to by any institution holding Indigenous A/V materials. In addition, I hoped to deepen my own understanding, as a culture worker and archives professional, of the diverse issues that arise when working with these materials, and to come away from my visit with a greater set of tools for approaching Indigenous representation in the A/V archive.

Australia and Native Rights

Engagement with the colonial and postcolonial treatment of Indigenous populations is a high profile political issue in modern day Australia[1]:

- The 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights Act provided the legal basis to rights to land based on traditional occupation in the Northern Territory of Australia.
- The Australian Aboriginal flag is an official Flag of Australia and displayed prominently in government settings.
- National Sorry Day has been held in Australia since 1997 to note the mistreatment of the Australian Indigenous population by white settlers.
- In 2008, then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd presented a formal apology to those Aboriginal children removed from their homes and placed in white households in the early-to-mid 20th century who are termed the Stolen Generations.

Though many of the policies expressed in the Protocol for Native American Archival Materials are quite similar as those in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services, Australia is unique from the United States in having adopted a moral rights paradigm of intellectual property. Stated succinctly, "the recent court decisions in Australia show a willingness of the courts to modify the law to accommodate indigenous beliefs. In the United States, the courts have been unwilling to expand the law in the manner of Australian courts."[2] While this report does not serve as a comparison of Australian and U.S. practices for Indigenous archives, I believe the high-profile stature of Indigenous rights

---

[1] Australian Government. "Apology to Australia's indigenous people." http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples. 2008. Accessed 5/15/2014.
[2] Grad, Rachel. "Indigenous Rights and Intellectual Property Law: A Comparison of the United States and Australia." Winter, 2003. Duke Journal of Comparative and International Law.

in Australia and the consequent impact on cultural institutions can serve to make this case study useful to archives professionals and culture workers in the United States.

Canberra, Australia is the governmental hub for the country, and also the home of a number of prominent archives and libraries with best practice protocols for both audio-visual collections and Indigenous collections and community outreach. At the following institutions, these issues are addressed on a regular basis by a diverse population including audio engineers, film archivists, museum communications professionals, academics, historians, and Indigenous community members, land councils, and advocacy groups. Below is an overview of the NFSA, AIATSIS, and the NLA

The National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA)
"Australia's Living Archive" operates a rich collection of indigenous materials in collaboration with native tribes and advocacy groups, under the guiding statements of "collection, connection, and protection."
- 2011 Collection Development Policy: We acquire material that represents:
  - A cultural and historical record
  - A record of Australian creative and technical achievement in the audiovisual context
  - A reflection of the role, nature and status of audiovisual media in society
- Indigenous Collections Policy notes: We recognise, respect and promote Indigenous people's right to:
  - Safeguard their intangible heritage contained within Indigenous collections recordings
  - Represent themselves in the curatorship of collections, exhibitions and events
  - Repatriate copies of audiovisual materials for cultural maintenance purposes
  - Determine the cultural status for access and use of their intellectual property
  - Research and re-contextualise recordings from an Indigenous perspective.
- By the numbers: The Collection contains over 1.9 million items, which includes moving image and sound recordings as well as supporting documents and artifacts

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)
Maintains a library and audiovisual archive containing the world's most extensive collections of materials on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history.
- Stated Purpose: "building pathways for the knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to grow and be shared."
- 2011 Collection Development Policy: "We aim to support research in major areas of Aboriginal studies and Torres Strait Islander studies, with particular strengths in languages and linguistics, cultures and societies, family history and visual arts. The collections are for Australian Indigenous peoples and the broader Australian and international communities." AIATSIS collects both published and unpublished items

related to Australian Indigenous peoples, but chooses to focus on collecting unpublished materials.
- By the numbers: 45,000 hours of recorded sound, over 8000 video titles and 6 ¼ million feet of motion picture film.

The Oral History and Folklore Collection at The National Library of Australia (NLA)
"Records the voices that describe our cultural, intellectual and social life."
- Collection Development Policy: "In accordance with its national heritage responsibilities, the Library records and collects oral history interviews with Australians of national standing, social history interviews which document the experiences and encounters of everyday life, and field recordings of Australian folklore."
- By the numbers: The Oral History and Folklore Collection consists of over 45,000 hours of recordings

NFSA, AIATSIS, and the NLA are situated intellectually as forward-thinking institutions regarding indigenous cultural heritage preservation and education, furthering Canberra's reputation as a worldwide leader in cultural and multimedia archive standards and best practices.

<u>Why Audiovisual Collections?</u>

Audiovisual collections in particular are a vital tool in constructing our understanding of history, empowering publics through knowledge, and organizing for social justice. This is especially true when it comes to archives that hold materials pertaining to Indigenous history and culture, and other populations with histories of oppression. Below is a list of recent projects involving NFSA, AIATSIS, and the NLA that demonstrate the potential of A/V archives to be a positive force for Indigenous populations.

National Library of Australia
Bringing Them Home oral history project – 300 interviews conducted with Indigenous people, police officers, missionaries, and administrators between 1998 and 2002 regarding the Stolen Generation of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their homes.
Mura Gadi – An online guide to oral histories and other materials regarding Indigenous populations
Indigenous Community Connections – An ongoing series of talks and concerts focused on Indigenous engagement with the Library's collections.

Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
Family History Unit – Includes the ability to listen to and gain digital copies of recordings that feature one's descendants.

ROMTIC – An acronym for Return of Material to Indigenous Communities, a repatriation program operated by the Audiovisual Access unit

Native Title Research Unit – Provides research and policy advice regarding the protection of Indigenous rights to land.

Targeted language workshops – Focusing on access to tools that help patrons develop local traditional language skills.

National Film and Sound Archive

Black Screen – Provides DVDs of contemporary and archival Indigenous materials to communities around Australia

Wrong Side of the Road – Restoration of 1981 film and oral histories conducted with subjects of original documentary

Indigenous Research Fellowships – Facilitate research in the collections for Indigenous performers, artists, academics, and archivists.

Stiff Gins and the NFSA – Indigenous music duo record set of music, inspired by the field recordings of Tasmanian Australian Fanny Cochrane Smith, to wax cylinder

Connection – Overview of repatriation and collaborative projects with Arnhem Land elders

As this list makes clear, "collections, connections, and protections," as the NFSA terms it, are at the forefront of how archives engage with Indigenous patrons and the legacy of archival materials. Each organization has particular focuses and strengths when it comes to collections policies and outreach activities.

Methodology

Over two weeks in Canberra, and a workday in Sydney, I met formally with 16 staff members in a variety of positions at these institutions. I completed site visits at the following units:

National Film and Sound Archive
- Indigenous Collection
- Film Collection
- Sound Collection
- Black Screen (Sydney)
- Access Centre
- Outreach, Access, and Communications Unit (Sydney)

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
- Native Title Research Unit

- Moving Image Collection
- Sound Collection
- Audiovisual Archive Access Unit (See Figure 1)

National Library of Australia
- Oral History and Folklore Collection

Research for the purpose of this report included observing workflows and meetings, discussing best practice strategies with staff members, and researching how collections and materials produced by and concerning Indigenous groups are acquired, processed, safeguarded, and presented to (and with) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the general public. In addition, staff discussed their collaborations and partnerships with Indigenous communities and advocacy groups such as the Buku-Larnnggay Mulka Multimedia Archive and Production Center to repatriate, reinterpret, and provide community access to collections.

Common Themes and Challenges

This section examines some of the common themes discussed during interviews and conversations with NFSA, AIATSIS, and NLA staff. Concerns or roadblocks are followed by strategies employed by the institution to alleviate that concern.

"Creating A Norm" Through Everyday Advocacy

"The NFSA remains committed to Indigenous engagement and to enabling and facilitating Indigenous people's exercise of cultural authority over, and maintenance of, expressions of their cultural heritage contained within the Indigenous audiovisual collections. The NFSA continues to promote Indigenous peoples' use of the collection to support their communities."
-NFSA Corporate Plan

"It's one of the challenges for the organization to create a norm where everybody has the same or at least a minimum level of awareness about what the organization is committed to contributing in terms of Indigenous collection material."
– Meg Labrum, Senior Curator for Film, Documents and Artefacts, NFSA

These statements are coupled in order to express the difficulty of putting the basic ethical tenets of an institution's mission into practice on an everyday basis. The National Film and Sound Archive provides a pertinent example of this issue, as the institution employs 178 staff who come from a variety of academic fields and professions. In addition to this, the personal and community affiliations and identity of staff can affect their "knowledge base" for Indigenous

issues. Labrum stressed the importance of not "corralling" Indigenous sensitivity to the institution's three-person Indigenous Collections team. However, the Indigenous curators (the word has a double meaning here, as all three members of the team identify as Indigenous, and they are responsible for the Indigenous collections and outreach efforts of the NFSA) and the Indigenous reference group play a central role in this issue of education and sensitivity training, beyond the guiding principles provided by the institution's policies and procedures.

Many staff members noted the fact that despite well-verbalized public policies for Indigenous issues, oftentimes staff must allow the flexibility to abide by a "case by case" worldview. In terms of this workflow, staff noted that the Indigenous collections team and reference group act as guiding forces. Labrum noted, for instance, that the Indigenous team provides "reminders" of representation issues that may not otherwise "leap to the surface." A recent example was the development of exhibit materials on WWI and WWII in Australia, for which there was limited but rich Indigenous archival representation that required interpretation by the Indigenous collections department. This system of checks and balances works for the NFSA when it comes to tricky ethical issues as it goes beyond simply employing policies for collections and representations – there are on the ground advocates for Indigenous representation. This strategy transcends the traditional workshop-based "sensitivity training" to make Indigenous representation a part of everyday life for staff. Not "corralling" this issue to a team, but rather involving the team in all aspects of the institution creates the norm that Labrum speaks of, and does it holistically.

Balancing Archival Priorities Through Limiting Collections Scope

"For us, it's more important to be at least providing some level of description for materials so that people can find them, at this stage, than it is for us to curate them into something meaningful."
– Marisa Harris, Collection Manager for Audio, AIATSIS

"One of the guiding forces is indigenous staff who are attune to the importance of who owns what, and who should have access to what. This is a really good thing ethically that we really look at communities and what they want, protecting the material, but on the other hand we've got the government saying 'look you've got to make this stuff accessible.' It's a real dilemma."
- Grace Koch, Native Title Research and Access Officer, AIATSIS

These two statements illustrate one of the most prominent challenges of audiovisual archive work, and are especially applicable to Indigenous collections and community outreach. In a broad sweep, archival priorities can be separated into the following categories:
- Preservation of materials
- Description of materials
- Presentation of materials

These are all functions that are vital to the archive. However, they are often in conflict with one another when staffing and resources are limited. Audiovisual collections offer vital links to the past for purposes of learning, interpretation, and legal and cultural advocacy. I would venture to say that every one of the 16 staff members I met with verbalized that the multiple priorities of the audiovisual archive was either a main or the major challenge of their work. This is true whether that work is Native Title Research at AIATSIS, curating the Black Screen program at NFSA, negotiating access rights for oral histories and musical recordings at the NLA, or preserving and restoring degrading moving image and sound recordings at any of the three institutions.

The issue of access is a particular challenge for those staff members who identify as Indigenous, and have to answer to their local or greater community as well as the government.

"Ultimately it boils down to ownership. The fundamental difference in having Indigenous (staff) is that it's 24/7. Because when we leave this place, we actually go back to our communities, and we're seen as representing this place, and there's an expectation from our community that we're here to open those doors and get those materials. It's two fold – two bosses – this organization as well as the community. We're here, first and foremost for the mob[3]."
– Peter White, Senior Curator of Indigenous Collections, NFSA

A strategy I observed for alleviating this challenge appears to be the limiting of the collecting scope of each organization. Many staff were frank about discussing how collections policies have been fine-tuned in order to not end up with a backlog of unprocessed and inaccessible materials. The ability to communicate with local and like-minded institutions is useful for this strategy. The following as some examples, which are generalized but offer an informal look into collection policies and collaboration. NFSA focuses on published materials and encourages potential donors to consider AIATSIS for certain unpublished materials that may be better served at this institution. The NLA's oral history program commissions for new materials and is able to target areas that are underrepresented in the nation's recorded sound collections. AIATSIS has a particular strength in traditional cultural expressions, while the NLA is actively interested in "significant social phenomenons" of globalism and cultural transmission, such as Aboriginal fiddle performers. Of course, these boundaries can and do become blurred. But the ability of organizations to be realistic about their strengths is a strong method of combatting backlog and facilitating access.

---

[3] "'Mob' is a term identifying a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people associated with a particular place or country … 'Mob' is generally used between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Therefore, it is not appropriate for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to se this term unless it is known to be acceptable." – Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Terminology, Queensland Health October 2011. http://www.health.qld.gov.au/atsihealth/documents/terminology.pdf

Approaching Access Restrictions Through Collaboration and Risk-Management

One cannot talk about access to cultural heritage collections without also discussing privacy and restrictions. This is arguably one of the most sensitive issues. Some of the concerns discussed at the three institutions included the following:

- Lack of space to privately play back recordings of sensitive materials for preservation purposes.
- Honoring mourning periods[4].
- Lack of appropriate staffing to respectfully honor private "men's business" or "women's business" ceremonial recordings. For instance, a film unit staffed by a woman and no men is at a disadvantage when it comes time to document "men's business" recordings for cataloging purposes (see Figure 2 for example of gendered workflow)
- Lack of Indigenous staff members to watch and interpret materials.
- Losing track of depositors/donors of collections when access levels need to be re-evaluated (this is especially important when repatriation of materials is on the table)
- Non-unique materials appearing in the public sphere (YouTube, etc.), which are noted as restricted in the archive.
- Holding restricted materials that are not available to be viewed for a significant period of time into the future – this creates a preservation and storage burden for archives.
- Renegotiating donor agreements to include new media – digitized collections available online, etc.
- Prioritizing who should get access. At AIATSIS, for instance, Indigenous clients are prioritized, while broadcasters and publishers may face a longer waiting time for materials. This, combined with having to seek community consultations for access, can lead to frustrating waits for materials.

"For publishers and broadcasters, anything that's going to be used in the public domain, they need to do a community consultation if the people in the photo or recording are recognizable – it's about them building a relationship with the community as well."
- Kylie Simpson, Access Unit AIATSIS

As with many of the other issues discussed with staff, a common strategy for working through these tough issues is ongoing and proactive collaboration with Indigenous working groups, land councils, elders, and community groups. Another is employing risk management approaches – doing the best one can to honor privacy while still engaging in archival practices. This can mean putting up signs noting when restricted recordings are going through the

---

[4] This is often alleviated on a large scale - the following verbiage is often added to photo, sound, and moving image collections online: "Users of this catalogue should be aware that, in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, seeing images of deceased persons in photographs, film and books or hearing them in recordings etc. may cause sadness or distress and in some cases, offend against strongly held cultural prohibitions." AIATSIS Mura Sensitivity Message http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/collections/muraread.html

preservation process, building clear access levels into internal archival software, and so on, in order to still maintain an effective preservation workflow. Staff in multiple roles noted that perfection is impossible to achieve when combining the goals of an archive with complex access restrictions on materials, and so the risk management approach is thought to be a more attainable goal and compromise.

Another attractive model that is gaining in popularity is turning to Indigenous communities to engage with and create archival materials. This can alleviate some fears about the archive as a gatekeeper, while also creating new and vibrant materials that speak to the current perspectives and realities of Indigenous peoples.

"(Our approach is) community contact, building relationships, getting them to engaging with collections, gaining authoritative advice, engaging with creative individuals, which brings us full circle"
– Matthew Davies, Senior Curator of Sound, Broadcast, and New Media at NFSA

Application to Smaller Institutions

First:
- Decide whether you, as an institution, have the resources available to properly and actively engage with community outreach, restriction tools, and intellectual property / moral rights discussions regarding materials related to Indigenous and other historically marginalized groups.

If yes:
- Outline scope of Indigenous materials in collection and relevant communities
- Define sustainable in-person/on-site and online delivery systems for engagement
- Engage with geographically relevant Indigenous community elders and councils about ethically questionable items in collections. Staff at NLA/AIATSIS/NFSA noted that it is important to find the appropriate person who can act as "spokesperson" for a group, which may also take more research time and networking.
- Encourage the reinterpretation of such materials by relevant communities and individuals
- Actively define collections policy based on the strengths of your institution in order to alleviate backlog
- Consider the use of collaborative "risk-management" approach to access policies and privacy controls
- If within collections scope, encourage Indigenous community members to deposit contemporary materials into your institution

If no:

- One possibility is to consider repatriation to community archive / transfer of materials to other institutions if proper attention cannot be paid to making these items accessible to communities who hold intellectual and moral rights.
- If this is not possible due to original donor agreements, facilitate a simple survey of materials, request a community consultation, and from this, apply basic access and privacy to materials where needed.
- One outcome of this visit that would not have been reached by a study conducted remotely was the clear impression I received of inter-institutional collaboration and communication. Staff members at all three institutions were aware of each others' work and had, in many cases, consulted or contracted with outside institutions to assist in IP issues, outreach, or preservation projects. It may be advantageous to engage in this type of inter-institutional networking when faced with historic Indigenous materials or outreach initiatives.

Conclusion

One of the most valuable lessons brought to light by visiting these institutions was that there is no one perfect approach to working with Indigenous community advocacy through libraries and archives. Structural constraints mean a focused mission is vital to receiving governmental and public support. In the climate of Australia's capital, which is at the forefront of confronting issues about Australia's historical treatment of Indigenous populations and culture, these institutions and others work as an ecosystem of balancing concerns and priorities of both the Indigenous population as well as those of policymakers, archives staff, and the greater public who operate as patrons to these institutions.

Suggested Reading / Resources

Institutions

The National Film and Sound Archive. http://www.nfsa.gov.au/

The Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. http://aiatsis.gov.au/

The Oral History and Folklore Collection at the National Library of Australia.
https://www.nla.gov.au/what-we-collect/oral-history-and-folklore

Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums. http://www.atalm.org/

AIATSIS. Archives Relating to Indigenous People. http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/fhu/archives.html

Protocols and Reports

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services
http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/atsilirn/protocols.php

Seeger, Anthony. Intellectual Property and Audiovisual Archives and Collections.
http://www.loc.gov/folklife/fhcc/propertykey.html

Protocol for Native American Archival Materials. http://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/

Torsen, Molly and Jane Anderson. Intellectual Property and the Safeguarding of Traditional
Cultures: Legal Issues and Practical Options for Museums, Libraries, and Archives.
http://www.wipo.int/export/sites/www/freepublications/en/tk/1023/wipo_pub_1023.pdf

Smithsonian Institution. Ethics of Exhibiting Culturally Sensitive Materials Online
(Bibliography). http://anthropology.si.edu/leopold/pubs/culturally_sensitive.htm

National Museum of the American Indian. Steps to Repatriation.
http://nmai.si.edu/explore/collections/repatriation/

International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives. Ethical Principles for Sound and
Audiovisual Archives. http://www.iasa-web.org/ethical-principles

Figure 1

Figure 2