
NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE: THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY

Factors shaping the uneven development of a
cultural institution

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ABSTRACT

The project is a historical study, from an interpretivist perspective and with overtones of action research, of a major cultural institution, the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA). It traces its erratic and protracted evolution from 1935, as an entity within the then Commonwealth National Library, to 2008, when it finally gained enabling legislation and independent statutory status.

My original contribution to knowledge is in documenting its first in-depth corporate history, in challenging mythology, received wisdom and published accounts particularly of its earlier years, and in shedding new light on causes and effects at its critical transition points.

In exploring the reasons for its uneven development and its struggle for identity, the study also considers the attendant risks for the national audiovisual heritage, the losses which have been a consequence of those risks, and the lessons which may be learned. The evidential basis for the study is a broad range of published and unpublished documents, a series of oral history recordings with key individuals, and relevant literature.

Findings are analysed against five “turning points” in the NFSA’s history:

- Emergence within the structure of the National Library
- Demerger from the Library in 1984 to become an autonomous institution
- “Repositioning” and “rebranding” as ScreenSound Australia in 1999

- Merger with the Australian Film Commission in 2003
- Demerger from the Commission and the gaining of statutory status in 2008

None of these stages was a benign experience. Most happened in the glare of media and political controversy, back-room bureaucratic manoeuvring and the public involvement of advocacy groups. For example, the bitterness surrounding the 1984 demerger from the National Library left deeply embedded conspiracy theories in its wake, which cast long shadows. Or again, the 2003 forced merger with the much smaller Australian Film Commission almost resulted in the destruction of the NFSA. Questions about personal and institutional ethics, public officials' duty of care, managerial and financial competence, and the role of public activism, emerge repeatedly.

The study documents how the NFSA survived the domination of three different institutional and bureaucratic cultures – a library, a portfolio department and film industry promotional agency – demonstrating the resilience and validity of the independent audiovisual archive concept, a creation of the twentieth century.

The study has discovered new information which illuminates motives and events, and is the first major exercise in documenting the emergence of what is now recognised as one of the world's leading national audiovisual archives. It is a history of the causes and consequences (as opposed to a history of collections, activities or buildings) which finally brought the NFSA to the threshold of a legal personality and a legislated mandate.