

A Case of Mistaken Identity: Governance, Guardianship and the ScreenSound Saga

Ray Edmondson

Ray Edmondson is Director of Archive Associates, a consultancy company (www.archival.com.au). He began his career in audiovisual archiving by joining the Film Section of the National Library of Australia in 1968, ultimately becoming the Section's Director. Described as the 'moving spirit' behind the creation of the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) in 1984, he served as its Deputy Director until early 2001, and is now its honorary Curator Emeritus. In 1987 he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for his professional work. Long active in the international forums of the audiovisual archiving field, Ray currently holds office in two of its federations (SEAPAVAA and AMIA), and teaches and consults in several countries. He writes and speaks widely, is the author of 'A Philosophy of Audiovisual Archiving' (UNESCO, 1998) and has recently completed the revised general guidelines for UNESCO's Memory of the World program.

Author's note: This article expresses my own personal and professional opinions, which do not necessarily reflect those of any organisation with which I am associated. I write strictly as an individual exercising, as best I can, my judgement of the ethics and obligations involved. In discussing events which occurred while I was employed at the NFSA, I have avoided areas of confidentiality.

This article explores some issues of perception, presentation, governance and guardianship for cultural institutions, and in particular the crucial importance of a custodial institution's name, by using the National Film and Sound Archive experience as a case study which illustrates the risks of radical renaming. For consistency, I refer to the institution throughout by the name adopted in 1984 – and by its diminutives, NFSA or the Archive. Anything else would be too confusing. In particular it considers:

- *implications of the change for the dependent and politically vulnerable status of the Archive, hence the need for legislation to give it an independent legal identity*
- *the possible covert significance of change from a name appropriate to national institutions to one which has the ring of a commercial brand, and whether this signals future subordination of its archival and research functions to those of commercial exploitation*

- *the unsatisfactory process of change, especially the paucity of consultation and the absence of transparency and accountability.*

Other dimensions apart, these are professional issues with implications for all custodial institutions. Further, the national and international stature of the NFSA as an exemplar means its policy decisions are influential, so they merit study and scrutiny.

Introduction: One night in June

The National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) had occupied the former Australian Institute of Anatomy building since its separation from the National Library of Australia (NLA) in 1984. The following year the Archive's foundational report, *Time In Our Hands (TIOH)* recommended that the still-unfinished 1931 building be extended to meet the future needs of an enlarging organisation.¹ By the time this was achieved 15 years later, staff had grown from the initial 15 to 200-plus, the annual budget from \$1 million to some \$16 million, and the collection to about 1.5 million items. Headquartered in Canberra, the NFSA also had offices in Sydney and Melbourne and a presence in the other capitals.

On 21 June 1999, some 500 guests assembled to mark the opening of the new building extension by Prime Minister John Howard. The honours were done, the metaphorical ribbon was cut. But the evening's main event, it transpired, was a surprise. It was announced that the National Film and Sound Archive had been renamed. Henceforth it would have both a marketing name, ScreenSound Australia, and an institutional title, The National Collection of Screen and Sound. 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.'² Amid the polite applause, however, it was obvious that many did not comprehend what had just happened.

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

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

¹ The Report of the National Film and Sound Archive Advisory Committee, tabled in Parliament on 27 November 1985. The Committee preceded the current Interim Advisory Council.

² From press release 21 June 1999.

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

Background

History of the National Film and Sound Archive

The genesis of the NFSA can be indirectly traced to the National Historical Film and Speaking Record Library, created in 1935 as part of the Commonwealth National Library (CNL). The CNL is the parent of today's National Library of Australia (NLA), National Archives of Australia (NAA) and Parliamentary Library. The NFSA became an entity in 1984, when the NLA's National Film Archive and Sound Recording functions were transferred to the guardianship of its portfolio Department and reorganised as the National Film and Sound Archive.³

This government action was the outcome of a decade of external activism calling, ultimately, for an autonomous archive to protect Australia's film, broadcasting and sound heritage.⁴ The problem was not just the perceived 'Cinderella' status of the work within the NLA, but the real-world difficulties for a national audiovisual archive developing an appropriate ethos and identity inside a book library, with a book library's perspective and priorities. Australia was late following a world trend; NFSA's ultimate creation was as much cultural statement as administrative action. Then, as now, its great strength was a support base within Australia's film and sound industries, among the oldest and proudest in the world.

Early in the NFSA's life, its Advisory Committee was charged with preparing *TIOH*, the vision and blueprint for the institution's future. Among other things, it reviewed and endorsed the Archive's name, and recommended enabling legislation.⁵ The NFSA's subsequent development from 'country cousin' into one of the world's best and most influential audiovisual archives is an extraordinary story.⁶ So the evolution of the descriptive name, National Film and Sound Archive, encapsulates both its institutional and cultural history, and Australia's relatively recent emergence into global visibility in this field.

³ On 5 April 1984 Arts Minister Barry Cohen announced in Parliament the 'establishment of a new National Film and Sound Archive ... based on the existing film and sound archives presently located in the National Library of Australia ... [it] will initially be an Office within the Department of Home Affairs and Environment ... the Government has decided that there is a need for a separate institution with a charter of its own and guidelines established by the Government after consultation with all the interests involved.' It soon became a division of the Department and still has that status in the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA).

⁴ The story is recounted in Graham Shirley's article 'Activism towards a national film archive' in *Cinema Papers*, July 1984.

⁵ *Time In Our Hands*, pp. 100–01, 113. Except for legislation, the vision has been largely fulfilled.

⁶ The author is working on a history of the NFSA.

Nomenclature⁷

Custodial or collecting institutions characteristically have descriptive, translatable and timeless names which indicate their status (eg local, specialist, university, national), their country or region, and their professional descriptor (library, archives, museum) – allowing, of course, for variant terminology in different languages. This formula provides instant peer and public recognition: thus the State Library of Victoria, National Museum of Australia (NMA), National Archives of Zimbabwe/Singapore/Australia and National Library of Vietnam/New Zealand/Laos etc. Deviations from this norm tend to be for particular historical or cultural reasons but the professional descriptor identifies the nature of the institution.⁸ The words *library*, *archive* and *museum* do, to some, sound musty and conservative: to others they are powerful terms, laden with values and prestige. They are also very practical labels: the key by which researchers find these institutions in directories and web searches.

Institutional names have strategic, educative and informational power. They create a public image, declare alignment with a set of professional values, establish status relative to peer bodies nationally or internationally. They claim a unique ‘place’ in the grand scheme of things – there can, for instance, be only one National Gallery of Australia.⁹ Descriptive names also, implicitly, declare a *mission*. They are a point of reference and a unifying symbol for stakeholders.

Film, sound, broadcasting and general audiovisual archives follow the same self-descriptive conventions. The professional term *archive* or *archives* is embedded in the names of all of the movement’s major associations, which group under the general descriptor *audiovisual archive*.¹⁰ Variations in terminology – such as *screen* instead of *film*, *broadcasting* instead of *radio* and/or *television* – depend on the

⁷ Detailed discussion of nomenclature and typology is outside the scope of this article. Interested readers might refer to the author’s monograph, *A Philosophy of Audiovisual Archiving* (UNESCO, Paris, 1998), especially pp. 7–8 and 13–16, at

www.unesco.org/webworld/en/highlights/audiovisual_archiving/philol.htm. A second edition, incorporating more recent debate, is in preparation.

⁸ For example, the Library of Congress is also the national library of the USA (rather like Australia’s pre-1960 Commonwealth National Library, which was also the Parliamentary library). Like its National Archives and Records Administration, the ‘country’ identification is taken as a given – as it also is on United States Internet domain names. The names of the British Library and British Museum reflect the fact that the United Kingdom is not one but several countries, some of which have their own national collecting institutions, such as the National Library of Wales. And closer to home, the New Zealand Film Archive also has a Maori name – Nga Kaitiaki O Nga Taonga Whitiwhia – which translates as ‘Guardians of the Treasures of Light.’

⁹ Hence an interesting debate about the name of the National Gallery of Victoria (see *The Age*, 31 January 2002, front page).

¹⁰ Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archive Associations (CCAAA), Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA), International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), etc.

history, context and nuances of such words in individual countries: the choice is not a casual or simple one.

Public institutions seem to alter their names for two traditional reasons. The first is change of status, function or circumstances, like mergers or separations, rendering the existing name incorrect. The second is incremental change in the interests of standardisation or to clarify status – which Australia’s ‘club’ of national custodial institutions have been doing for some years.¹¹

Changes are not made lightly because the names of public institutions, like schools, churches, military bodies and other anchors of society, are effectively public property – they embody continuity, history, values and ‘ownership’ by their adherents and supporters.¹² The formalising of names in legislation recognises their long-term significance and, because statutes cannot be quickly amended, it serves to inhibit frivolous or ill-considered change. Without consultation or due process, change becomes an act of dispossession.

A British case study

In 1998 the audiovisual archiving world was astonished by the decision of the British Film Institute (BFI) to absorb the well-known National Film and Television Archive into the generality of the institute as BFI Collections. Founded in 1935, the NFTVA has been the model and mother of archives worldwide, including Australia. Professional sources saw the change as a management drive to depersonalise well-known departments, and ensure government funds were given to the whole institute, not specifically NFTVA, which could no longer be separately identified.

Apparently, as key expert staff and corporate memory departed, donations of films and money declined, because donors are less willing to support a faceless bureaucracy than an identifiable archive. The name, National Film and Television Archive, defines role, status and mission; BFI Collections has many possible meanings. Currently BFI Collections’ National Film and Television Archive is a permitted phrase, though to describe the collection only, not staff.¹³

Conversely, in 1995, London’s Imperial War Museum had renamed its ‘Departments’ of Film, Photographs, and Sound Records as ‘Film and Video

¹¹ The Museum of Australia became the National Museum of Australia; the Australian National Gallery became the National Gallery of Australia; Australian Archives became the National Archives of Australia. The National Film and Sound Archive (of Australia) was already normative.

¹² Reflect, for example, on the consequences of renaming the Royal Australian Navy as ‘Military Output Division 1 – Seaborne’ and the Royal Australian Air Force as ‘Military Output Division 2 – Airborne’ – or similar flights of imagination. How would they affect image, credibility and morale?

¹³ Late report at press time: it is understood that a BFI restructure is about to reinstate the NFTVA both in name and in fact.

Archive', 'Photograph Archive' and 'Sound Archive' respectively. Elsewhere, others have recently moved in the 'archival' direction: for example, the Hungarian Film Institute is now the Hungarian Film Archive.

Why the National Film and Sound Archive was renamed

Around the time of the BFI decision in 1998, there was a confluence of circumstances in Canberra, when consultants were called in to review the NFSA's 'positioning' and visibility. Its complex kookaburra logo also required graphic simplification. Canberra staff had become more aware of visitors mispronouncing the name: 'National Film and Archive' or 'National Sound and Archive', or 'Australian' instead of 'National', were common variations.¹⁴ From the viewpoint of precision, the name had never included *television* or *radio* even though these had always been major parts of the collection, so did the name need revising as well as the logo? When the National Archives headquarters moved house, Telstra cut off the NFSA's phones instead, thus confusing the NFSA with a sister institution.

In late February 1999 it was decided to review the name as part of 'repositioning' the Archive. The same consultants were involved in a process which led to the choice of a new name and logo. On 9 March, NFSA staff were formally advised of a project to 'examine, and possibly change, the Archive's branding – this is its name and/or logo and general presentation'.¹⁵ Impetus built. Staff were invited to suggest alternative names, although there was no subsequent poll or other evaluation of the suggestions transparent to staff. The exercise majored on presentational ideas rather than professional issues, and it was not based on any corpus of readily available discussion material on the implications of name changes.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, many of the name suggestions aimed at clever acronyms ahead of descriptive substance.

There was limited external consultation. During March a market research company ran interviews and focus groups with selected stakeholders to assess general perceptions of the Archive, including views on its present name. It later emerged that some participants found this a disempowering experience.¹⁷ Given the compressed timeframe, the new name itself was evidently not tested with

¹⁴ Such variations are the case for many institutions. In the author's experience it rarely implies misunderstanding of the *nature* of the institution – just a lack of precision.

¹⁵ 'Branding brief' emailed to all staff.

¹⁶ On 21 March the author wrote and circulated to all staff some brief background material on contextual issues.

¹⁷ The author has privately received feedback from some participants. To quote one who felt the group had been 'steamrollered': 'We were shown montages of images and asked which ones best illustrated how we thought of the Archive. We tried to say that none of them did, but this was not an acceptable answer, and the question was simply rephrased until we provided an answer that fitted their preconceptions. I cannot remember the debate about the name, but do remember vividly feeling both really angry and completely helpless as I left, and sharing this with others who felt the same'.

stakeholders, nor the planned changes canvassed with the overseas professional community.

The opening of the Archive's building extension had been seen as the platform to announce the changes. Originally set for the end of May, it eventuated on 21 June. Decisions on the name were made some weeks ahead of this, but kept confidential within a small executive group: staff in general learned the new name only hours before its public announcement. With the adoption of the two-tier title, ScreenSound Australia: The National Collection of Screen and Sound, *collection* replaced *archive* as the professional descriptor, avoiding nominal confusion with the National Archives of Australia. *Screen* replaced *film*, ostensibly embracing *television* too. Here some international context may be useful.

In the language of audiovisual archives, *film* has not, on the whole, been superseded by *screen*. Both words have multiple associations, *film* often covering other moving images including television, which uses film terminology like 'footage' and 'filmed'. *Screen* can pertain to objects broader than moving images, or reflect other associations. For example, the name of the Scottish Screen Archive, a subset of the government funding agency Scottish Screen, reflects its ownership, not its holdings. *Collection* is a professional term meaning 'a set of items selected individually'. It can also describe a component or department within a larger entity, but not a discrete organisation. The descriptor *archive* or *archives* serves to describe (depending on context) a place, an institution or its contents, and reflects alignment with the global profession, its ethos and standards.

Nevertheless, the Archive's *Annual Review 1998–1999* (pages 4 and 6)¹⁸ stated that

The Archive's name was changed to ScreenSound Australia, The National Collection of Screen and Sound, on 21 June 1999. Its role as Australia's national audiovisual archive is unchanged

and then, with finality, cited as a major outcome the

...completion of the repositioning and renaming of the organisation as ScreenSound Australia to update the organisation's image and to increase its marketing potential – reflect [sic] the range of audiovisual materials collected and made available.¹⁹

By moving away from a descriptive name as its public identity, the change took the NFSA in the *opposite* direction from the national custodial institutions' long-standing trend *towards* descriptive name standardisation. This trend was

¹⁸ Since the Archive has no legal personality, it tables an 'annual review', not an 'annual report', in Parliament.

¹⁹ Author's emphasis.

reaffirmed by the National Museum when its chairman, Tony Staley, was quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 13 September 2000, over a year after the NFSA's name change:

... the Council of the National Museum of Australia has rejected suggestions from consultants that it 'brand' itself by adopting an Aboriginal or other name ... the overwhelming view of the council was that we've got a great name and it must go on being the name.

Yet if the NFSA's name change to 'update' its image and 'increase marketing potential' was a logical step, why wouldn't the same logic apply to the other institutions? Why not change the National Library, for instance, to InfoMax Australia or the National Archives to archives.com? If there is a good answer to that question, it must bear on the rationale for moving the NFSA from a standard to a non-standard formula.

What is that rationale? No statement on the subject was released when the change was announced, and subsequent public explanations have been brief and not necessarily consistent. This lack of explanation is a notable departure from past practice, for the NFSA has long been an exemplar in the development and publication of comprehensive operational policies and ethics statements covering all aspects of its work. Yet on the renaming, the longest exposition so far published appeared in the Spring 2000 issue of *News from the Archive*, and is here quoted in full:

National Screen and Sound Archive

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

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

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

The assertions invite many questions, for they are disputable and no supporting evidence is cited. But in this Spring 2000 statement, no mention is made of the formal title announced in June 1999, *The National Collection of Screen and Sound*. What had happened to the NFSA's 'completed renaming' to 'take it

successfully into the 21st century'? To seek the answer, let us explore the reactions, and consider how they matter.

Did it matter?

Public response

Perhaps some long-term supporters among the departing guests on that June evening wondered why one of Australia's major custodial institutions, having just fulfilled a foundational dream, had suddenly dumped its hard-won and well-established identity to start over again – even retrospectively redefining the evening's event as a 'celebration' of same. An unsuspecting constituency, caught off balance, soon found it had little to celebrate. As the news sank in over the following months, reactions ranged from laughter to puzzlement, concern and disbelief. One year on, in July 2000, a commentator voiced this assessment:

...the reaction from the industry could best be summed up as outrage ... [a] bland name which didn't give the vaguest hint of the Archive's core activity, not to mention the fact that the new name hid its public service role.²⁰

There had been a growing tide of complaints. The *Annual Review 1999–2000*, page 14, noted that 'out of a total of 99 complaints received, ScreenSound Australia's change of name and the relocation of its Sydney office provoked a total of 73 ... Staff have worked very hard to communicate the rationale for these two changes and complaints have steadily decreased'. The Review does not, however, record the 'rationale' communicated by staff. In early 2000, a survey by the Friends of the National Film and Sound Archive logged similar numbers of written complaints. Beyond this, it is understood there were many informal complaints, comments in visitors' books, and so on.

The marketing name ScreenSound had proved, after all, *not* to be unique: it turned out to be both a technical term for a film or television sound track, and an existing name already in use three ways in Australia for, respectively, a recording studio, a profession and a piece of sound mixing equipment.²¹

So stark had been the identity switch with new name, new logo and new corporate colours that many people did not link the ScreenSound name with NFSA at all and assumed it was a different organisation.²² Sales of videos, CDs and other NFSA products, having risen steadily for years, dropped by nearly

²⁰ Peter Galvin in *If Magazine*, July 2000, page 11.

²¹ So ScreenSound Australia could literally mean 'Sound Tracks Australia'. Screensound Pty Ltd (www.screensound.com.au) is a Sydney-based sound recording studio; the Australian Screen Sound Guild (www.assg.org.au) is a forum for members of the screen sound profession, also headquartered in Sydney, and the SSL ScreenSound is a sophisticated sound-mixing console, marketed internationally.

²² Reactions to the new logo – a curl of film shaped like a sound horn – are mixed, and not pursued here. The main point of the change – simplification – was missed: the logo is still complex, as the Archive's *Style Guide* emphasises.

half.²³ The imminent ScreenSound Foundation and the *Treasures* exhibition, announced at the June 1999 launch as part of the new initiatives, had failed to appear as promised. A spokesperson had reportedly stated that the Archive would gradually change its name back.²⁴

Meanwhile, in early 2000, the new body, Friends of the National Film and Sound Archive, had been established, pointedly adopting the original name. It released a discussion paper and charter.²⁵ It sought immediate formal reinstatement of the professional descriptor *archive*. But it also saw the name change as indicative of larger, underlying issues about the Archive's direction and called, among other things, for renewal of closer ties between Archive and constituency.

Fears that the renaming signified reorientation and commercialisation of the institution had been fuelled by the controversial relocation of the Archive's Sydney office to the new Fox Studios site in November 2000. Producer Glenys Rowe voiced the concerns of many filmmakers:

Is the name change reflecting a change in direction of the archive towards more leisure and entertainment and away from its former core function of preserving our national film and sound heritage?²⁶

The annual conference of the Screen Producers' Association of Australia (SPAA) in Sydney provided opportunity for the Archive to respond to such apprehensions, and an open letter from the NFSA Director had appeared in the conference daily newsletter a few days later to:

...assure [you] that ScreenSound remains fully focused on collecting, preserving and making accessible Australia's screen and sound heritage ... the name change was designed to alleviate problems associated with the old name. Many of our functions, like the preservation of Australian television, were simply unacknowledged in the old name. We were also continually confused with other archives, especially the National Archives of Australia ... we were also looking for a name that would appeal more to young people. The name change was designed to make us *more* accessible. It did not in any way signify a change of direction...²⁷

By early 2000 the Archive had responded to feedback by replacing its formal title, The National Collection of Screen and Sound, with National Film and

²³ Sales have never regained pre-name-change levels. The *Annual Review 1998–1999* reported a 24 per cent increase in sales that year, and a 155 per cent increase over the four years to that date. The reviews for 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 do not report sales figures.

²⁴ Statement by the NFSA's public affairs manager, reported in *If Magazine*, July 2000, page 11.

²⁵ Available from Shelley Clarke, Friends NFSA, email: mercury3@ozemail.com.au.

²⁶ Producer Glenys Rowe, quoted by Garry Maddox in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 Nov 1999.

²⁷ Published 12 November 1999. No evidence of 'continual confusion' with other archives is offered. In late 1999 a Canberra-based study conducted for other purposes by the National Archives of Australia suggested there was no significant public confusion between NFSA and NAA. Comments to the author from SPAA members suggested that any perceptions of confusion were Canberra-centric, for none existed within the film and television industries themselves.

Sound Archive as the secondary name on its logo block, creating a linkage between old and new identities. But in yet another shift, National Screen and Sound Archive took this place in July 2000 when it was designated the formal name of the institution.

The Archive had conducted a limited survey of stakeholders, inviting (among other things) comments on the renaming, although the results appear never to have been published. Likewise, Archive publications apparently did not devote any space to reviewing or debating the issues raised by complainants, or explanations given to them. From reading the newsletters, one could easily conclude that the changes had been well-received – and thereby, perhaps, feel less inclined to voice one’s own misgivings, given the cumulative effects of repetition and reinforcement.²⁸

In general, the name ScreenSound took some getting used to as members of the public found it hard to grasp.²⁹ Complaints from stakeholders, here and overseas, focused on its lack of meaning and its evocation of a corporate, commercial or regulatory organisation, not a public institution or an archive.³⁰ It conveyed no status or dignity: a slick, ‘trendy’ formula that would date, and would be missed in web searches for archives. There was criticism of ‘secret’ process, of Canberra-centred thinking, and of change for its own sake. There was fear of hidden agendas.

Professional implications

Beyond these reactions, there were larger professional implications. Dropping its self-descriptive public identity, notwithstanding the later, subordinate reinstatement of the word *archive*, isolated the NFSA in a professional no-man’s-land. It was nominally distanced from the international audiovisual archiving movement in which it is an exemplar, as well as from the national movement of which it is the putative leader. As a leading professional educator it sent contradictory signals to students and staff. It appeared to leave the ‘club’ of national custodial institutions, and thereby abandon its place in their spectrum of responsibilities. Attention previously focused on a descriptive name, mission and profession was now being turned towards a brand name.

²⁸ See, for example, Norman L Munn, *Psychology*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1961, p. 446.

²⁹ Recorded variations include Sunscreen, FilmScreen, Screensavers, Smokescreen, Scream Found, National Screen Australia, Screen and Sound Town and the inversion SoundScreen (which is also an existing trade name).

³⁰ The name evoked many interpretations, including a product, an electronics shop, a theme park, a film or sound production company, or a collector of projection screens. Sample respondent comments: ‘smacks of shonky used car salesman’, ‘sounds like a firm that does double glazing’, ‘never trust an organisation whose name looks like a misprint’, and ‘sounds like just another company’.

Today's framework of libraries, museums and galleries originated in colonial times, so well-established state institutions formed a strong basis for the development of national networks, which include professional associations and kindred institutions. But the NFSA, like other audiovisual archives, is a product of the 20th century and lacks a comparable support structure in its own country. A big fish in a small pond, it is always at risk of introspection and groupthink, reliant on international networks that are less immediate and accessible than local ones. So it is traditionally vulnerable to geographic and professional isolation.

The renaming seems to have increased, not diminished, that isolation. 'Are we still an archive?' one staff member asked me soon after the change, as the 'a-word' rapidly became politically incorrect within NFSA as well as its parent government department. It has only gradually, and mostly informally, reasserted itself, because the new name invites the logical question, 'What is ScreenSound?'

Professionals draw on corporate history for inspiration, and for their sense of vocation and continuity. Many institutions value this heritage enough to document and publish it. Custodial institutions do not spring out of nowhere: they have beginnings and struggles, they develop collections, fight battles, advocate standards, wrestle with funding, mould perceptions. This is especially true in the pioneering field of audiovisual archiving – in which NFSA has a very proud history, described by one authority as 'miraculous'. It has informed and inspired archivists well beyond Australia.

Timeless names symbolise and give entrée to corporate history. NFSA's renaming is a fracture, a blockage to that entree. Discussion and celebration of its history is made more complex and difficult by the change of reference points, especially if the change suggests substance that is not really there. The advent of the National Film and Sound Archive was a watershed, marking major advance and policy change. Was the advent of ScreenSound Australia anything more than cosmetic change? Did it really benefit the institution? Yet it becomes hard to speak, present, or write without revisionism, projecting the new name backwards in time, stealing the past. Examples abound in policy documents, reports, publicity and so on, too numerous to recount here. Rewriting history to gloss over name changes can skate on thin ethical ice.³¹ There is a public and professional expectation of fair dealing and honesty by government.

Consider, for example, this statement on page 5 of the Archive's *Annual Review 2000–2001*:

³¹ NFSA is bound by the FIAF Code of Ethics. Article 4.1 reads in part: 'Archives believe in the free sharing of knowledge and experience to aid the development and enlightenment of others and the development of the archival ideal ... Archivists will not knowingly be party to the dissemination of false or misleading information, and will not deliberately withhold information (except where the confidentiality of a third party is involved) relating to their collections or areas of expertise.'

In 1999 the organisation changed its name to ScreenSound Australia, the National Screen and Sound Archive, to reflect contemporary and future directions.

Whatever agenda the last phrase foreshadows, the rest of it obviously contradicts history, not to mention the *Annual Review 1998–1999*, just two years earlier, quoted above. The Archive's website has carried the same incorrect information since at least January 2001.

The re-naming mattered deeply to the Archive's stakeholders, among them academics, collectors, producers, clients, students, actors, technicians, writers, professionals, and the interested general public. Committed stakeholders are discerning: caring about their institution, they respect transparent consultation, but do not expect to be ignored or manipulated. Their support gives them moral 'ownership' of the institution and what it stands for, and therefore, of its name. For, in the end, to whom does the institution belong? Staff? Government? Council? Stakeholders? The general public? Future Australians? A public institution may be 'run' by an administration and a board, but in Australian democracy such people are stewards and guardians, exercising a duty of care over the national patrimony – intangible assets like its identity, philosophy, ethos and collective knowledge, as well as tangible ones like collections, databases, and buildings.

By encapsulating its history and values, an institution's name should be a unifying symbol for its supporters. Unfortunately for NFSA, its new name has become a symbol of division.³² While the changes are, it has been stated, aimed at enfranchising young people who may not know about the Archive, they come at the price of disenfranchising existing stakeholders. Where people are free to choose, many have declined to embrace the changes. Where they are not, conformity may have come at the cost of zeal and respect.

For still lacking is a comprehensive explanation for the original changes, later variations, flow-on effects, and of the way the change process was managed. It would be instructive to evaluate the success or otherwise of the renaming against its originally stated objectives. Custodial institutions are rational places, basing their work on well-understood professional principles, standards and philosophies. It is axiomatic that they be accountable to their constituencies for their decisions, choices and policies, and be ready and willing to expound on their rationales, including the rationale for their names. This is the stuff of articles, conference papers and so on; it is where institutions interact with their stakeholders and publics.

³² For example, at meetings and events, tension between adherents of 'old' and 'new' names can be palpable.

While we await such expositions on the rationale of ScreenSound, inevitably the vacuum will be filled by myth, speculation, or, worst of all, discreet avoidance of discussion lest it be unwelcome. This is not the atmosphere in which the ethos of archiving – scholarship, intellectual rigour and the search for truth – can flourish.

Governance, guardianship and unfinished business

For the Archive the need for a transparent, logical and consistent rationale is greater than for any of the other members of the ‘club’ of national custodial institutions.³³ The reason is that the Archive’s identity and status cannot be checked against enabling legislation or a public charter since, alone within the ‘club’, it has no such backing.

So in the context of the renaming, absence of a publicly accessible rationale leaves the name itself with a more than usual workload. The institution’s status, role and professional character, its functions, its nature cannot be taken from documents on which its authority is founded, nor from a body of transparent statement and argument it has issued; it cannot even be taken from an articulated procedure within the Archive, but must rest on just the name.

The Archive still has no legal personality: it is merely a division of a government department, and under direction. So any debate about its names – formal, marketing or otherwise – is ultimately academic. They may have legal status as trademarks of the Commonwealth, but otherwise they are just tools of administrative convenience.³⁴ They could be changed again as easily as they were in June 1999 or July 2000.

In other major libraries, archives or museums a radical renaming proposal would face checks and balances like governing councils, professional associations, stakeholder groups and possibly Parliament, if amendment to an act or regulation was entailed.³⁵ But for the NFSA there is no automatic mechanism to apply the will of Parliament, public and profession to such matters. Even with the best intentions, unwise changes can be authorised, without consultation or explanation, by politicians insufficiently informed about the organisation, its character and its stakeholders. Is such an ongoing risk to the stability and professional identity of a major public archive an acceptable state of affairs?

³³ National Archives of Australia, National Library of Australia, National Museum of Australia, National Gallery of Australia, Australian National Maritime Museum, Australian War Memorial, and NFSA. All except NFSA have enabling legislation.

³⁴ The relevant trademarks appear to be #797134 SCREENSOUND AUSTRALIA NATIONAL SCREEN AND SOUND ARCHIVE, the revised version of a trademark originally lodged on 11 June 1999 by Davryn Pty Ltd and assigned to the Commonwealth on 21 June 1999 [the day the renaming was announced], and #880011 NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE lodged on 21 June 2001.

³⁵ The NFSA’s Interim Council has always been an advisory body, not an executive one.

Both the fact and manner of the renaming seem to have suddenly exposed the vulnerability of Australia's national audiovisual archive. Fundamental change comes unsought, unexpected and unexplained. NFSA may be deflected from core archiving obligations onto commercial and marketing agendas which are really subsidiary to its mission. Indeed, what assurance is there that it will *remain* an archive? Can even its continued existence be assumed? It falls within the executive power of the government of the day and is therefore at the mercy of political interference and contemporary fads. Rationalisation and expenditure review committees, along with the machiavellian disciples of Sir Humphrey Appleby, are facts of bureaucratic life.³⁶

Good governance requires that policies and actions be based consistently on stated principles, that issues be promptly handled, that the institution's present and future needs be understood and diligently addressed, so that it may be the victor and not the victim in its circumstances. Unfortunately the political imperative of defending the recent changes could well lead in unforeseen directions, for names – even non-specific ones like ScreenSound – generate their own logic over time. The character and status of the National Film and Sound Archive is self-evident, but ScreenSound Australia could mean many things: it has to be explained by a tag line, and the character of the organisation could change along with the tag lines.

When the National Library of Australia relinquished its film and sound archive functions in April 1984, it sought assurances from its Minister about the future integrity of the collections being transferred to the NFSA - from the protection of a statutory authority into the guardianship of the bureaucracy. From the wealth of contemporary documentation, including Minister Cohen's 5 April 1984 announcement in Parliament and subsequent events, it is evident that the NFSA's departmental tenure was meant to be transitional, pending formal institutional status.³⁷ But later circumstances deflected this intention, impetus was gradually lost, and it never moved on.

So for a major custodial institution lacking the accountability of a statute, the renaming or some equally radical initiative, with all its context and consequences, was perhaps an accident waiting to happen. Bureaucratic guardianship has been found wanting, and it should be warning enough. It is time to keep faith, without delay, with the NFSA's founding objectives and intentions, and establish it as an authority under the Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act 1997, if necessary by regulation pending the passage of its own enabling Act. How else can it assert a mandate, be independently

³⁶ One is tempted to imagine what the writers of *Yes, Minister* might have done with this whole scenario.

³⁷ NFSA's Council has always been styled as 'interim' in that expectation.

responsible for its collections, be protected from sudden and unexplained change, and be held publicly accountable for its actions and stewardship?

It is also axiomatic that the governance, values and stability of custodial institutions must visibly rest on an appropriate professional philosophy, and depth of knowledge, larger than individuals or current circumstances. This is not the equivalent of simply observing the ruling values and obeying the directives of the Public Service.

Conclusion

To summarise, I believe that:

- The need for legislation to define and protect the Archive is self-evident and urgent.
- Its core national archival functions must be unequivocally reaffirmed as the primary business of the institution, with marketing demonstrably in a subsidiary role.
- Accountability should be served. Legitimate questions raised by the renaming should be fully answered.
- The institution's name must be revisited in accordance with the principles and issues outlined in this article.

The Archive sits between a rock and a hard place. This major national cultural body switched to a non-standard, commercially oriented name in circumstances that call for transparent explanation. Obviously, abandonment of the ScreenSound name as the primary identity raises practical, political and financial questions, but facing them cannot be avoided.

Although National Screen and Sound Archive has been the formal title since July 2000, there seems a reluctance to acknowledge, much less promote, the title *in its own right*.³⁸ Its relegation to tagline status supporting its 'contraction' – as in the redundant and tongue-twisting formula, ScreenSound Australia, the National Screen and Sound Archive – when it is used at all, only reinforces the (intended?) impression that ScreenSound Australia is the 'correct' name. Does this ambivalence signal a future intention to discard the formal name or otherwise change the tagline? Sadly, the pre-June 1999 clarity and simplicity of National Film and Sound Archive is now sufficiently remote for some staff and clients to have never known a time when the institution's name was *not* an issue.

³⁸ Few, including the Australian Society of Archivists (to judge by its website) seem to know this. Even the Archive's annual reviews have not made this clear. There is a separate National Screen and Sound Archive letterhead, but it can only be used with the Director's express approval (see the style guide on the website at www.screensound.gov.au).

NFSA is now styled ambiguously, in different forums here and overseas, by its original name and its three new ones – sometimes all together – confusing both identity and credibility. Is not this self-inflicted dilemma a national embarrassment? ‘We all wondered why you did it’, commented one senior American archivist, ‘now how are you going to get out of it?’

The answer is administratively simple, if the will is there. The formal restoration to centre stage of the name National Film and Sound Archive is the most obvious, appropriate, economical and – above all – honest way of repairing the fracture in the institution's history and identity. The name symbolises six decades of struggle, activism, achievement and pride in Australian heritage. Against that, what does the name ScreenSound Australia truly symbolise, and what is the real cost of investing in it?

The lessons

‘I made mistakes, God knows. But they were honest mistakes, and we learned from most of them’, said one of Australia’s great film makers, Ken G Hall, whose memory is honoured in an annual NFSA award.³⁹ What lessons may all custodial institutions learn from the NFSA case study? I think there are five:

1. Institutional names are vital statements of professional mission, identity, relationships and status, and should be devised with care and intellectual rigour. It is perilous to change them lightly or hastily. Alterations, especially if they deviate from the norm, require sound judgement and full assessment of future consequences.
2. Protection of the integrity, identity and independence of custodial institutions can only be guaranteed by legislation or its nearest equivalent, and a declared professional philosophy. The guardianship of public service structures and standards is not enough.
3. Transparency, accountability, consultation and accuracy are fundamental professional values, and indispensable to good governance. Anything which inhibits them is cause for concern.
4. Input from consultants and advisors may be useful, but is only one element in decision making. Professionals have an obligation to form and express their own views on issues affecting the well-being of their institutions and collections, even if these are at variance with prevailing sentiment or policy.

³⁹ *Directed by Ken G Hall*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1977, p. 191. The Ken G Hall Award recognises outstanding contributions to film preservation in Australia.

5 Undue emphasis on 'user-pays' and marketing can undermine the *raison d'être* and credibility of custodial institutions. Public confidence lies in their *non-conformity* with the shifting values of the brand-sated, spin-doctored world around them.

A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches (*Proverbs 22.1*).