

Restructure of the National Film and Sound Archive – What does it mean for the Oral History Program?

By Elizabeth Craig,
Coordinator, Film & Broadcast Industries Oral History Group

Published in Voiceprint, OHAA NSW Oct 2014 edition.

Public archives, libraries and museums across the country have been struggling to cope with increasing costs and decreasing budgets. A large part of the problem has been the pressure to adapt to the digital economy. Now that online access to information has become the norm, public collection agencies have had to change their focus from preservation and storage to creating better public access to their collection through digitisation, while retaining standards of curatorship and preservation – a hugely expensive exercise.

In April, following a six month business review, the CEO of the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), Michael Loebenstein announced a major restructure to address the problem. 28 members of the NFSA's workforce of 206 were to go, and some programs axed or integrated with other functions. The news was greeted with outrage by many in the audio visual community. Angry discussions took place on online forums and other outlets, and a petition signed by 140 members of the film and broadcast industries protested against the lack of consultation and transparency in the NFSA's restructure. They called on the NFSA to release its business review and demanded a series of public forums before decisions on the restructure became final.

Interestingly, job and service cuts to other public sector institutions such as the National Library, War Memorial and Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, didn't attract anything like the angry response to NFSA's announcement. Journalist, academic and oral historian, Barbara Alysen commented that this reflected the deep relationship the stakeholders have with the NFSA. They not only draw on it to produce their films and audio productions, and rely on the Archive to preserve their work, but, she writes, they are also fundamental to its history. "In the early 1980s they lobbied to have the audio and moving image collection made independent of its then-home, the National Library. They were active again when the Archive was absorbed into the Australian Film Commission in the early 2000s. The NFSA has been a statutory authority since 2008."ⁱ

In response to demands by the audio visual community, Michael Loebenstein and the NFSA Board announced a series of public forums to be held in capital cities around the country in July, where consultation and discussion could belatedly take place. Transcripts of the discussions have been published on the website.ⁱⁱ

So how will the NFSA change?

In the Draft Strategic Plan 2014/15-2016/17 released in June, Loebenstein outlines his vision for the NFSA and the changes to the business model needed to ensure the Archive becomes more 'relevant, vibrant and connected' in an increasingly digital economy.

Essentially, the main priorities to achieve this ideal are:

- Large scale digitisation
- Collaboration online with other public collecting agencies

- Build partnerships with peak industry bodies and interest groups to encourage sponsorships and other fundraising methods. Raise the profile of NFSA.

The NFSA will be operated by three branches:

- **Corporate and Business Affairs Branch,**
- **Collections Branch** (which includes responsibility for curatorship and preservation),
and
- **Strategy and Engagement Branch** (under the direct management of Michael Loebenstein. This branch includes the Communications section (headed by Nina Frykberg), responsible for marketing and publicity, fundraising, establishing partnerships, developing online audience engagement ... and the Oral History Program)

The Oral History Program

To the alarm of the oral history community, a casualty in the restructure was one of only two staff members dedicated to the NFSA's Oral History Program. Melbourne manager, Ken Berryman lost his job despite the Program having just completed its most productive year ever, with over 100 new interviews commissioned, and with transcription and digital preservation programs running as well.

Also unsettling was that the Oral History Program was to be moved from the Collections branch responsible for curatorial and preservation functions, to the Communications section in the 'Strategy and Engagement' branch. Did this mean that curatorship and preservation would no longer be a priority? In a letter to the Minister for the Arts, copied to the CEO and Chair of the NFSA, Oral History Australia's President, Dr Sue Anderson protested that it was difficult to see how the effectiveness of the Program could be sustained with reduced staffing and its revised status.ⁱⁱⁱ

This and other issues were raised at the public forums held around the country in July.

- The Draft Strategy Plan states that the Oral History Program will be developed "as a model two-way collaborative activity demonstrating the NFSA's 'share objective'".^{iv} What does that mean?

Firstly, Loebenstein assured questioners at the public forums of his clear commitment to the Oral History Program. Indeed he maintains he will be keeping a close eye on it as Manager of the Strategy and Engagement Branch in which the Communications section sits. Secondly, he is adamant that curatorial and preservation standards will not be compromised. A key role of the Communications section is to closely align itself with the Collections branch which will have input into the preservation and curatorship of Oral Histories.

Loebenstein sees the Oral History Program as a "key part of our collection that speaks to both the 'collect' and to the 'share' agendas." NFSA commissions oral histories of the creators of audio visual work already held in the collection. Their stories shed light on and create context for their work. Their oral histories can therefore be used as an instrument to build connections with stakeholders (the producers, cinematographers, writers, scholars, etc). And because NFSA mostly has control of the content of oral histories, they can also be published, acting as a lure, inviting the audience to look further into the collection. As Loebenstein puts it: "Oral histories are... a perfect calling card for drawing attention to what the archive actually does as a whole."^v

And this explains why the Oral History Program has been moved from the Collections Branch to the Strategy and Engagement Branch where it is much more accessible. Loebenstein was never comfortable with its location in Collections Branch because, unlike film and sound productions its function was to support and give context to those productions in the collection. It will now become part of the strategy of helping the NFSA to raise its visibility, attracting interest in its collection and sponsorships.

- If oral histories are going to be used to attract sponsorships, isn't that going to skew the candidates selected towards celebrity names? A social history of the audio visual industry would be incomplete if it did not include the oral histories of backroom people who play significant roles – producers, editors and production people.

Loebenstein believes the best chance for success for the Program is to have a healthy mix of popular creators and lesser known people. "If for opportunistic reasons it just focused on broadly popular creators, I think it would fail," he says. "If it neglected the opportunity to create more awareness and to capture very renowned and probably elusive creators, it would also fail."^{vi}

- Isn't there a conflict of interest between using oral histories as a tool to attract attention to the collection and maintaining their integrity? If interviewees can't be confident of the guarantee we give them that any sensitive material will be kept under wraps as they have instructed in the Copyright Agreement, then we will end up with sanitised stories, no different from publicity interviews.

Management assure oral historians that integrity of the interviews will be maintained at all times. The policy is that nothing is published without checking first with the interviewee, even if they have ticked the box giving total control of the interview to NFSA.^{vii}

- Has the Oral History Program become Sydney-centric now that it no longer has a presence in Melbourne?

Although the Program will now be run out of Sydney it is in the context of a broader organisational branch. Sydney is now the hub for industry interaction. "It would be very foolish to not have a stronghold in Melbourne," says Loebenstein, "and very foolish to not work with Melbourne interviewers [and] advisors."^{viii} In fact, he says, there is a commitment to oral history around the country.

- In what ways will oral histories be used to increase resources?

Loebenstein feels that Oral Histories can attract funds in a number of ways, from philanthropy and sponsorships down to micro-payments, where someone can be offered already digitised material for free, in return for a donation towards digitising a project, or production of another oral history.

Volunteer resources in the form of direct approaches to part time or retired industry people and crowdsourcing are other considerations. (Crowdsourcing is where services, such as providing transcriptions, are solicited online from large groups.) Loebenstein acknowledges that volunteer resources have had mixed results in the past, but feels it's time to revisit the idea.

- Collaboration with other collecting institutions, broadcasting and TV networks and industry interest groups.

Although there has been fellowship between federal institutions, it has not been the case with the states collecting agencies. There has been no sharing of resources, and a “them and us” attitude has prevailed. With recognition that digitisation and online access are priorities common to all collecting bodies, and all are struggling with fewer resources, state and federal agencies are moving towards collaboration. Meetings between managers at NFSA and some of the State Libraries, and also with state funding bodies are commencing soon.^{ix}

Online index of oral histories held in public and private collections.

The aim is that once proper investment has been made in infrastructure, digitisation will allow access to a catalogue of all the collecting agencies’ oral histories (known as metadata). Similarly, the NFSA is keen to include broadcasting and TV networks in this collaboration, urging them to record oral histories of staff as they depart (as only Foxtel is doing currently) and make them accessible online.

Sharing storage.

Storage is a huge issue for collecting institutions, and digitisation means that while original material needs to be preserved, but not often accessed, one suggestion has been to have shared deep storage off site. This would save the constant and expensive need for more space in high cost real estate areas where public museums and libraries are located.

What’s next in the process towards the NFSA’s vision for the Oral History Program?

As yet, NFSA Management is still feeling its way in the implementation of its vision. But consultation with stakeholders is certainly planned to be a continuing part of the process.

Later this year there will be a second round of meetings for consultation with interest groups and peak industry bodies, involving NFSA’s managers. The final strategic plan and a business model will be published towards the end of the year. From there, Michael Loebenstein plans to have regular – small informal meetings to address specific issues. He has in fact, already met with some industry groups for discussion on their area of interest.

On 2nd September, Michael Loebenstein, Nina Frykberg and Bronwyn Murphy (Coordinator of the NFSA’s Oral History Program), attended a meeting of the Film and Broadcast Industries Oral History Group (FBIOHG) in Sydney.^x Discussion on the future of the Oral History Program was frank and constructive.

The budget is slightly less than before the restructure, and during the readjustment period, there will be fewer oral histories commissioned. Loebenstein and Nina Frykberg intend to put a lot of effort into attracting new funds for the Oral History Program.

A stocktake of the collection will be conducted, looking for the gaps, and working out how many of the existing digitised oral histories and transcripts can be published (according to the copyright agreements). The next step will be to devise a system which emphasises sharing of oral histories, and then to ramp up that program. Ideally, funding for the program will be found from a third party, and the program expanded over the next three years.

Michael Loebenstein has undertaken to attend FBIOHG's December meeting where indigenous representation in the Oral History Program will be discussed.

Loebenstein sees the Oral History Program evolving "from something that is largely driven internally by the Archive and funded one hundred per cent by the Archive, to a more collaborative endeavour [with public and private sector bodies] to expand the funding basis of the program.... and to sharing the collection."^{xi}

So, from a stakeholder's point of view, it certainly appears that oral histories will retain a strong presence in the NFSA, and a very positive outcome is that they will be far more accessible than in the past, not only those held by the NFSA, but if the collaboration plans go ahead, in all collecting institutions. And as the chequered history of the NFSA's Oral History Program has shown (see Footnote X), stakeholders will not hold back if they believe it is being compromised or under prioritised in any way.

ⁱ Barbara Alysen, 'Files Can't Wait: the Future of the National Film and Sound Archive, <http://theconversation.com>, 31 July 2014

ⁱⁱ <http://www.nfsa.gov.au/about/corporate/strategic-plan-2014-15-to-2016-17/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Letter to Senator George Brandis, Minister for the Arts, from Dr Sue Anderson, President, Oral History Australia (undated)

^{iv} Draft Strategic Plan 2014/15 to 2016/17, p.15

^v Public Forum, Canberra, 7th July, 2014

^{vi} Public Forum, Sydney, 1st July, 2014

^{vii} Nina Frykberg, Manager, Communications Section of Strategy and Engagement Branch, FBIOHG meeting, 2nd September, 2014

^{viii} Public Forum, Melbourne, 4th July, 2014

^{ix} Meeting with Film & Broadcast Industries Oral History Group, Sydney, 2 Sept. 2014

^x FBIOHG (under the auspices of NFSA) is a group of 20 or so volunteers from the film and broadcast industries, who since lobbying the NFSA in 1991 for greater commitment to oral history (and kept on its case as interest in the program ebbed and flowed under different managements), have conducted oral histories for the Archive, as well as advised and supported it on various industry issues. The NFSA recognises and appreciates the expertise of FBIOHG members, and always has a presence at its quarterly meetings.

^{xi} Public Forum, Canberra, 7th July, 2014