



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS

(Briefing)

**Reference: Certain issues related to non-print material**

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## **JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS**

**Thursday, 16 March 2000**

Members: Mr Lieberman (*Chair*), Senators Bishop, Calvert, Chapman, Lightfoot, Ludwig, McKiernan and McLucas and Mr Hardgrave, Mrs Hull, Mr Lloyd, Ms Jann McFarlane, Mr Rudd and Mr Sidebottom

Senators and members in attendance: Senator Lightfoot and Mr Hardgrave, Mrs Hull, Mr Lieberman, Mr Lloyd and Ms McFarlane

### **Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

Briefing on certain issues related to non-print material.

**WITNESSES**

**BRENT, Mr Ronald Ian, Director, ScreenSound Australia, The National Film and Sound  
Archive..... 13**

**NIZETTE, Mr Mark, Senior Manager, Policy and Communication, ScreenSound Australia, The  
National Film and Sound Archive..... 13**

**Committee met at 8.13 a.m.**

**BRENT, Mr Ronald Ian, Director, ScreenSound Australia, The National Film and Sound Archive**

**NIZETTE, Mr Mark, Senior Manager, Policy and Communication, ScreenSound Australia, The National Film and Sound Archive**

**CHAIR**—I now open the meeting. I thank *Hansard* for their attendance today. The committee is undertaking a series of private briefings prior to launching an inquiry into non-print material authored by government and parliamentary sources. The committee intends to investigate preservation and authenticity issues relating to the spectrum of formats from the DVDs to videotape. We are very keen to investigate how access to such material is gained by Australians living in regional and remote areas in particular. I welcome officers of ScreenSound Australia to today's meeting.

I remind you that proceedings here today are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings in the houses themselves. The deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. That is said to all people. It is not meant to segment anyone. As you know, we have to finish very quickly because of the requirements of other committee members and I understand that Senator Lightfoot has to leave at 8.26 a.m. Would you like to make an opening statement and give us a broad overview of your functions?

**Mr Brent**—I guess, simply put, the National Film and Sound Archive, now called ScreenSound Australia, is responsible for collecting moving image and recorded sound materials to provide a cultural record of Australia. Our responsibilities range from collecting to delivering access to those materials. Those materials encompass film, video, television, cinema, home movies, newsreels, recorded music, radio programs and current affairs programs—a very broad range of cultural communications on the principal media of communications of the 20th century.

**CHAIR**—That is very interesting. I am sure you have some treasures buried away there.

**Mr Brent**—We have an enormous numbers of treasures. In fact, probably a lot more than people suspect. As a very simple example, if people can remember the Australia Remembers year celebrating the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, a lot of the images that people saw on television, such as the man dancing down the street in the victory parade, that they assumed came from the national War Memorial are from our collection. We provided those images. We are less prominent than the other institutions, but our collection is very extensively used. I would venture to suggest there are very few Australians who in a year do not see something from our collection on television or hear it on radio.

**CHAIR**—Ron, I am sure members of the committee would like to visit you at some time and have a look, if we would not get in your way. How far away is your building?

**Mr Brent**—About five minutes drive from here. You are very welcome at any stage. We have taken a number of parliamentary committees through the complex at various stages, and I

hasten to add we do a very good VIP tour. I am sure that you would find it very interesting and rewarding. There is a lot of valuable information to be gleaned.

**CHAIR**—How much time does the tour usually take?

**Mr Brent**—We try to keep it as short as required, but I guess most people who have come with less than hour have ended up staying at least an hour and wanting to stay longer. So if you have an hour to an hour a half, that would be good.

**CHAIR**—I am sure we will arrange something at a mutually convenient time.

**Mr LLOYD**—Mr Chair, I certainly would like to put forward the proposal that, as a committee, we do visit the archive because it has been an area I have been very keen to visit. With all our time pressures, it is one of those things that you always have in the back of your mind we must do that. I would like to formalise that at some stage today.

**CHAIR**—We will. I am sure all members would agree with that, and Lexia will liaise with you. Do you have any submissions you would like to make to us?

**Mr Brent**—I would have to start by saying that, given the nature of the letter that you wrote to us—it was in reasonably general terms—I do not have a very clear picture of exactly what you are looking for. But what I could probably add to what I have said already is that we collect videotape as a core part of our collections, but one of the key challenges for our organisation is to look at the changing technologies and to manage those changes in technology. For example, as DVDs are replacing videotape, we have to address that at two levels: one is the level of what we collect and what we preserve in our archive; and the other is the level at which we give access and the sort of media that our customers require access in. Just in the electronic media, we would run in excess of 20 to 30 different forms of sound and video format. Technology is very much the core of our strategic future. I guess what I would then turn to is to say, if you could give me a bit more of a steer on the sort of briefing you want, I could then provide some more information.

**CHAIR**—Generally, the committee is very keen to ensure that all the agencies involved with the preservation of material authored by federal government and parliamentary sources are kept safe, intact and accessible, and increasingly more accessible to people from regional and remote areas and to people with disabilities. Also, without wanting to say that the committee has been charged with this responsibility, I think all of the members feel a very strong sense of wanting to help ensure that any obstacles to obtaining leading edge technology—perhaps with recommendations at some time or other—are overcome and also to help coordinate between all the agencies. We have already seen some evidence where agencies are keen to work together adopting uniform platforms and all those sorts of things but, for various reasons, there is no set agreement on how it would be done. The committee is not quite sure yet what its terms of reference will finally be. These are preliminary briefings. We are asking for the benefit of the wisdom and advice of people like yourselves from which we might then be able to conclude the targeted areas that we can look at. That is the general drift of it.

**Mr Brent**—That gives me a clearer sense of what you are looking for, and I think I can provide some more general background. In the field where we operate there are loosely two princi-

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pal areas: one is film, which I would segregate because it is an optical medium and not an electronic medium; and then there is the electronic media which include all the various forms of sound and vision recording. They range from the latest new digital technologies to some very antiquated audio technologies that, nevertheless, essentially now rely on electronic processing. Some of those early sound recordings were purely mechanical but now, to properly get the information from them, we use electronic means. I use an example of the old record players. In the early days they used sound horns and no electronic system at all for amplification but, nowadays, when playing records one uses electronic media.

The significance of the distinction is that, in relation to film, new technologies and new techniques are relatively peripheral to the core business of preserving film. As a simple example—and I will try to avoid using too many numbers and arithmetic—to store digitally all the data that is contained on a single full length colour feature film would require about 15 terabytes of data. That is a term that probably does not mean a great deal but, to translate that into something that has meaning, to store that data would take the equivalent of the storage on approximately 6,000 home computers. That is how much storage capacity you need to store, properly digitised, a single full colour feature film. As a result, as a storage and protection medium for the information on colour feature film, effectively film is the only viable medium.

Having said that though, the most common form of access to film is now videotape or television and, therefore, even film comes back into the electronic medium. In the electronic medium the big challenge we have is the massive rate of change of those technologies. Again, to put that into context, the record—the round black thing with the hole in the middle—lasted about 80 years from its invention to its more or less effective displacement.

**Mr LLOYD**—Some of us still remember them.

**Mr Brent**—Exactly. They are still a viable technology today and they are still able to be purchased in the shops, although that is becoming increasingly rare. In contrast, if you look at some of the new digital technologies, digital audio tape for example, which is a form of audio tape that has been around for five or six years, will probably not survive for more than another five or six years at the most. We are talking about perhaps a dozen years for a technology that was certainly significantly superior to some of its predecessors but, because of its rapid displacement by even more effective technologies, it will have a limited life.

The audio CD, which is the most commonly used digital format in the broad consumer market, is a technology that has now been in the consumer marketplace for not all that much short of 20 years. Because there are approximately 600 million CD players around the world, one can expect that it is not going to be rapidly displaced. One can expect that it will last for at least another 20 years. But it is probably reasonable to assert it is unlikely to last another 60 years to bring it up to the life span of the old black thing with a hole in the middle—the record. The reason I say that is the changes that are happening in those technologies.

DVDs can already store up to 17 times as much information as the audio CD—DVD now standing for ‘digital versatile disc’. They were first brought out it was ‘digital video disc’ but then it was realised that, although they had been brought out to accommodate the need for more data to be able to hold video information, the fact that that is why they had been invented did not restrict their use to just moving image; they are now being used in a range of forums and

will ultimately displace the CD—unless, before they get a good hold in the marketplace, another new technology comes along. Certainly, there are new technologies in the wings such as multi-layered DVDs, double-sided DVDs, more densely packed DVDs and indeed new technologies where, instead of using a laser beam for recording the information, they are looking at using photon beams or particle beams of another sort, which are essentially finer beams so that they can write even more finely and densely on the disc.

What that suggests is that the real issue for organisations like ours is to be able to manage these rapid transitions in technologies. If we were now to gear up to be able to provide our services in DVD technology only to find that it never took hold in the marketplace, we would waste a large sum of money and achieve very little. An example of that would be the digital compact cassette brought out by Philips a few years ago, which was a digital version of that small audio cassette that everyone used in their car and that most people probably still use in their car. That was brought into the digital age through a development that Philips had, which changed it from an analog signal—a signal that basically is a wavy line written in a magnetic strip—to a digital signal which is essentially a set of ones and zeros that are translated by a computer into sound. That technology has never really caught on in the consumer marketplace. It is essentially now regarded as being obsolete before it was ever really successful, the reason being that it was displaced by the disc.

The only advantage that the DCC, the digital compact cassette, had over the audio CD was it was recordable as well as replayable. But, as you are probably aware, you can now buy recorders for CD material either in once-write only or rewritable format at a relatively modest cost, and bringing those out essentially put an end to the notion of the digital compact cassette. What that highlights is how quickly and how fickle the marketplace can change in relation to the use of particular technologies. In the case of an organisation like ours, it is important that we not be technology leaders. While we are technology leaders in the field of preserving the technology we apply to keep the collection safe and to look after it, we cannot be technology leaders in terms of the particular technologies that we back for the purpose of holding or for the purpose of delivering our collection. We have to follow the marketplace.

Again, to use another example in the video area, the English archive has moved heavily to two digital video formats called D1 and D3 as their principal digital formats. If we had followed the same lead in Australia, we would be sitting there as an archive with a good D1 and D3 capacity but nothing much to use it for, because in Australia the industry has essentially run with other digital formats. The video production and television industries have generally run with beta digital and now with DVC. So had we set our technological future on D1 and D3, we would have wasted a lot of money and had nothing to offer the public. We are now moving into those digital technologies but very much as a follower, not a leader.

The challenge for an archive like ours, as we add all of these new technologies, is that we do not displace any old technologies. If we are still to be able to read a two-inch video, which was the original video format in Australia, we need to maintain a two-inch video capacity. It is my understanding that there are now only two centres that operate two-inch video players in Australia: the Channel 7 studios in Sydney, and they have decided that they will not maintain the machine so the next time it breaks down it will be out the door; and our facility. We need to maintain that facility because we hold approximately 6,000 two-inch videos, and if we do not have the machines to play them and the expertise to maintain and to run those machines, we



will have 6,000 pieces of plastic with rusty iron filings glued on them. That is what a videotape is: iron oxide on a plastic base. Without the machinery, they are no more than that. It is not like a film where, even without a projector, you can hold it up to the light and at least see the image and get a sense of what is on there. With a videotape, without the technology there is nothing that you can do.

Therefore, the challenge for us is to maintain existing technologies while we develop the capacity to meet the demands of new and changing technologies. That is an issue that will confront all archives in all the publication fields but is most dramatic in the electronic media; that is, in video and audio. That is where the changes are the most rapid, the most dramatic and the most complex. At the moment, for instance, our video lab alone needs to be able to maintain two digital formats but needs to have the capacity to deliver in probably about 15 different video formats that are still currently used by customers in one way or another.

**CHAIR**—If I can come in at that point: members have commitments and I, as chair, have a duty to make sure that they can get to them. There are a huge number of questions I could ask and I know Lexia has prepared some questions for the committee to consider as well. I am going to ask the committee members if they would like to ask a couple of quick questions now. I foreshadow that we will write to you setting out a number of questions, including questions on migration, which has been going through my mind while hearing you talk, and if you could let us have a letter in due course with those responses that will fill in a lot of the details.

**Mrs HULL**—I do not have to be a regional and remote area; I can be in the inner suburbs of Sydney or Melbourne—how would I know that you existed? When you say, ‘We are logging all of this material,’ how does a general person know: (a) is there any cost to them if they are looking to access material from your sources; and (b) what are the strict guidelines that you have for the use of any of your material?

**Mr Brent**—There are no really short answers but I will be as short as I can.

**Mrs HULL**—I am fine for a minute. I am supposed to be at another meeting but I am interested in this.

**Mr Brent**—In terms of knowing about our existence, that is one of the key issues we have identified for our strategic future. We are less well known than any of the other national cultural institutions. Everybody knows there is a National Library or a War Memorial. We are deliberately working to increase our profile.

But, in the meantime, there are a number of things that we are doing very directly. We have a travelling show that we take to rural and remote areas. Last calendar year we had four travelling shows reaching out into rural and remote Australia to try to spread the message about our existence, the value of what we hold and how to get hold of it. Indeed, I would claim ours to be the only national cultural institution that has taken an exhibition to Humpty Doo, which we have managed to do. We have been everywhere quite literally from Mount Isa in Queensland, to Zeehan in Tasmania; from Albany in Western Australia to Grafton in New South Wales. We have been right across the country with that show, and it is still travelling.

Secondly, we have, as everybody does, a web site and that touches a little on some of the questions you asked because the web site provides access to our entire catalogue of over 370,000 items and identifies those that are readily available in an access format. It also contains details of some of the other access services we provide, including a range of product that we ourselves produce as video and audio product and that we market around Australia through 700 outlets, including in rural and regional Australia. In that regard, I think we are probably very safe in claiming that we are the world's leading archive in taking our collection and actively marketing it to the public. None of the other major national archives around the world have a product program that is anything remotely approaching that. We have close to 100 products in our range that we have developed ourselves and taken from the collection and that we sell through outlets right around Australia.

We also have access centres in all states and our own offices in Sydney and Melbourne where people get access to our database, expertise about the organisation, information about access services and a range of viewing materials. We have some of the most commonly used materials available in those venues. We also run our Canberra headquarters site which has access facilities, and any member of the public can go in there. If we have access copies available—we have about 12,000 to 14,000 access videos and audio material on site for immediate reviewing—people can look at them for free within about 10 minutes of arriving. We have a library service which is free where people can search our database and be guided through our catalogue. We have an exhibition, which at the moment is free as well.

We also run a range of activities to make sure that, in the areas where we are most used, we can be as effective as possible at delivering material. That is usually television, radio and film producers. It is because of that that we appear on television so frequently, but without people knowing about our existence. A statistic that again becomes meaningless because it is so large but that perhaps puts it slightly in context is that, of the top 22 television programs that we contributed to last financial year, the combined viewing audience was 30 million people. That means that, on those 22 programs, a total combined viewing audience—a lot of people are the same people several times—30 million people saw something from our collection. We are major contributors to a number of prime-time television programs. A good example would be the *Our Century* program, which was the highest rating program on Sundays on television for about 26 weeks in Australia. Roughly one-third of the visual content of that came out of our collection. Those sorts of methods of giving access to our collection mean that we are giving access right across the country. In all of that I think I have forgotten the third question.

**Mrs HULL**—Cost.

**Mr Brent**—For professional users of our collection, the cost can get very high—quite literally, thousands of dollars per second. That is for television stations or people making commercials and so on. But, for the public, we keep our costs very low. If there are access copies available and people only wish to view them, it is free. If people want us to make copies, we generally charge those at the lowest possible cost that we can and generally not much more than the cost of the materials. But the costs can go up if you are looking for us to do major work on difficult to access material.

**CHAIR**—I am sure we will have supplementaries on that.

**Ms JANN McFARLANE**—One of the interests of this committee is disability access. There were a number of issues that came up including web sites that are difficult to access and material that is difficult to access. I notice in here that, with your travelling exhibition, you have a performance indicator about access. How do you handle things like hearing impaired people and captioning and, with your travelling exhibition, how do you handle physical access as well as physical access to your other buildings? What is your goal there?

**Mr Brent**—We are focusing heavily on that. We do have some problems in that our headquarters are in a heritage listed building which makes disabled access difficult. It is fully accessible by disabled people but not at a level that is equivalent to able-bodied people, and we are still working on a solution to that problem. In other words, effectively they have to come from one side of the building whereas able-bodied people can come in from either side of the buildings. That is physical access to our headquarters site. We do look at a range of methods for improving access. For instance, our shop is providing a retail service for closed caption video material so that we actually have, effectively, the agency for delivering that, which is a vehicle for providing exactly that sort of access. We also try to make sure that we provide a range of access facilities—that is, exhibition, moving image, sound—so that different people with different abilities can see different parts of the collection. We cater very much to the elderly who are often at least partially hearing or sight impaired, or mobility impaired.

**CHAIR**—Wonderful.

**Mr LLOYD**—One quick question: can you give us a general overview of what you see as the relationship and the cooperation between government agencies and departments and the National Film and Sound Archive?

**Mr Brent**—We have a range of programs for direct cooperation with other agencies. We have regular meetings with the National Library, Australian Archives and the War Memorial to make sure that we all operate together and that we only overlap in concept. Therefore, we try to make sure that we do not overlap in the work that we carry out. For instance, we store material and do restoration work on material for the War Memorial. We have undertaken major projects for everybody from the Antarctic Division of the Commonwealth government, right through to the University of New South Wales or indeed to countries overseas such as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines. We have done technical preservation work for all of those countries.

**Mr LLOYD**—Do you charge overseas countries?

**Mr Brent**—We certainly do.

**Mr LLOYD**—Good export industry.

**Mr Brent**—And we charge the commercial sector. We do make money—a relatively small amount of money—out of some of those commercial restoration services.

**CHAIR**—I think we could literally stay here for a month. Our appetite has been whetted by the visit that we will certainly make. I would like thank you both for being here for our short introductory relationship. As a committee we hope that we can do some constructive things to

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assist in the development of policies that will be complementary to your work in the future. That is what we would like to do. Thank you very much for attending. We will write to you with these further questions. Certainly, a visit will also be arranged during this year, which I am looking forward to. I wish you well with your work. Congratulations for your wonderful achievements. I declare the meeting closed.

**Committee adjourned at 8.40 a.m.**

