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Deadline 2025: AIATSIS and the audiovisual archive

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ABSTRACT

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Australia's archival repository for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage, is the nation's peak body for collecting, recording, archiving and returning Indigenous-related knowledge and information. Since 1964 AIATSIS has amassed the world's largest collection of print, audio and film materials on Australian First Nations peoples. This paper canvasses the Deadline 2025 campaign for audiovisual collections at risk and the complexities of preserving audiovisual archives. It argues that while the Plan's institutional focus is essential, equally essential is institutional leadership in establishing integration with community-held archives, supported by appropriately resourced and skilled community-based partnerships.

KEYWORDS

AIATSIS; digitisation; archives; audiovisual preservation; community collections

Australia's national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander archive

For almost six decades, Australia's national government has acknowledged the importance of the cultural heritage created and held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens. In 1961 an Institute Council was formed, and three years later its role in the preservation of Australian Indigenous knowledge and cultural memory was formalised in law. The national parliament legislated in 1964 to establish the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), having a primary function to record Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures before they – in the parlance of the times – disappeared forever.

Fourteen years later, in 1978, the *Aboriginal and Islander Identity* magazine published an article explaining the beginnings of AIAS and its changing approach to preserving Aboriginal knowledge. Audiovisual documentation through collecting 'tapes, films, photographs and slides' alongside books and documents was seen as central to research aimed at capturing both past and living representations of Indigenous heritage, however partial, so 'knowledge of the old ways is written down and kept for the future' for both Indigenous and white Australians.[1] The law that established AIAS was amended in 1984, transforming AIAS into the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).[2] One of the key functions of AIATSIS, as set out in Part 3, Section 5 of the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Act 1989* (Cth), is to establish and maintain a cultural

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resource collection consisting of materials relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.[3]

Christie claims that archives and their related digital databases are not 'innocent objects'.[4] Shilton and Srinivasan observe that archives reflect a range of professional and societal positions.[5] The AIATSIS archive is no different. The materials amassed for more than 50 years reflects the Institute's collection policies and its engagement with researchers, by which a large proportion of its unique collection has been acquired. The collection currently held by AIATSIS numbers more than a million items, including over 650,000 still images (negatives, colour slides, digital images), 40,000 hours of audio recordings and 6.5 million feet of film.[6] The AIATSIS Annual Report 2017 identifies a key priority in its triennial corporate plan is to maintain a collection that 'is safe, accessible, valued and growing'.[7]

As the collection has continued to grow, its governance also has evolved. At the time of its establishment, AIAS had a governing board numbering 22 councillors, none of whom was Indigenous. Under the leadership of Dr Peter Ucko (1972–80) this changed, with more Aboriginal people employed in AIAS and appointed to the Council. Mr Ken Colbung, AM, MBE became the first Aboriginal Chair of the newly formed AIATSIS. The appointment of Aboriginal Chairs continued with Professor Marcia Langton AM (1992–98), Professor Michael (Mick) Dodson, AM (1999–2017) and Professor Michael McDaniel (2017–). Currently members of the AIATSIS Council are predominantly Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, reflecting the diverse nature of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and issues. Scholars, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous, continue to make an overwhelming contribution to AIATSIS's collection and knowledge.[8] This governing membership and the contributions of Indigenous scholars are unique among Australia's national cultural collection organisations.

These developments have shaped and been shaped by the relationship of the collection to the communities it represents. The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples prepared a public submission to an independent review of AIATSIS in 2014 on the importance of this collected material to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, declaring that they 'feel a sense of strong ownership of AIATSIS and its collections … through a First Peoples paradigm of collective and trans-generational ownership of knowledge, cultural values, beliefs, rituals and laws'.[9] Concepts of Indigenous ownership are now a major influence on the AIATSIS collection, extending Western knowledge and values with respect to the scope, significance and contexts of the collection. In 1961 it was not foreseen that the proposed collection would grow to its current volume. Nor the extent to which Indigenous people now play a growing role not only in deciding upon materials to be lodged and for which purposes, but also in generating materials intended to meet their particular needs and wishes.

In line with this, the AIATSIS Corporate Plan for 2018–22 outlines the key strategic aim to 'Build and preserve a national collection and make it accessible – Ensuring that our collection is representative, relevant and diverse; optimising appropriate accessibility; and maximising opportunities provided by digital innovation.'[10] Yet, the materials collected in the early days of the agency, the increasing volume of materials prepared and collated by Indigenous people themselves, and the advent of digital technologies and of social media pose growing

challenges for AIATSIS to address. In particular, the creation of new materials by Indigenous peoples, both with analogue and digital technologies, has emerged as a new factor requiring new functions of AIATSIS. These functions arise from an overarching Indigenous paradigm and value system. Therefore, the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Amendment Act* 2016 was introduced and passed by parliament in 2016. The functions outlined include:

(a) to develop, preserve and provide access to a national collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage;
(b) to use that national collection to strengthen and promote knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage;
(c) to provide leadership in the fields of:
    (i) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research; and
    (ii) ethics and protocols for research, and other activities relating to collections, related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and
    (iii) use (including use for research) of that national collection and other collections containing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage;
(d) to lead and promote collaborations and partnerships among the academic, research, non-government, business and government sectors and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in support of the other functions of the Institute;
(e) to provide advice to the Commonwealth on the situation and status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage.[11]

The amendments clearly define the role of AIATSIS in preserving a national collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, which includes ensuing the longevity of their audiovisual collections. Moreover, there is recognition of the leadership role of Indigenous Australians in developing and extending the definition, interpretations and purposes of a national collection and indeed of archiving itself. These themes are canvassed in this paper.

AIATSIS audiovisual archive and the 2025 Plan

UNESCO promotes the invaluable role of audiovisual materials through a designated World Day for Audiovisual Heritage. Audiovisual documents (film, radio, television, audio and video recordings) transcend 'language and cultural boundaries' and appeal 'to the eye and the ear to the literate'.[12] The purpose of an audiovisual archive as understood in a Western paradigm is primarily to provide access to the collections, supported by collection activities such as acquisition, cataloguing and preservation.[13]

The AIATSIS audiovisual archive consists of multiple analogue and digital formats, and its role encompasses acquisition, conservation, preservation, cataloguing, content listing and digitisation, together with storage, holding and library facilities enabling researcher and community access. The audiovisual archive is comprised of three divisions: audio, moving image and still imaging services divisions. The still image collection numbers approximately 650,000 images, the world's largest collection of such materials related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The images include a variety of historical formats including glass plate negatives, glass lantern slides, film and

photographic film (colour, black and white, and in all formats and sizes). The moving image collection consists of approximately 900 film titles and over 7000 video titles. The collection is primarily 16-millimetre film, the medium of choice for documentary filmmaking from the 1960s through to the 1980s. Many researchers also used 8-millimetre film format from the 1960s to the 1970s.

As formats change, and with technological updates, the formats for reproducing community viewing copies also will continue to change. According to archivist Tom Eccles from the AIATSIS moving images department, the replication of the AIATSIS moving image collection commenced in the 1980s. Films were copied onto VHS tapes for people to view and access the collection. The VHS access copies were digitised to a Windows Media Video format and copied to CDs ready to be played on computer. MP4 is the current community access format used by AIATSIS.

The Institute's library and audiovisual unit is an important repository of information and knowledge relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The drive to conserve material is based on preservation of the content. This requires substantial resourcing. The AIATSIS library and audiovisual collections for some years have been making their analogue and now digital collections available to the community, researchers and the wider public. AIATSIS has developed a number of digital assets management systems and these continue to evolve as new standards are developed.

In 2009, audiovisual archive staff conducted a major planning session as part of the development of a long-term preservation plan – the 2025 Plan. The 2025 Plan seeks 'a systematic approach to identifying and copying the most at-risk materials held in the collection with a view to transferring all magnetic media material and the majority of film-based material to digital format by 2025'. The Plan identifies 'the level of technical and human resources required to meet this objective'.[14] The work of AIATSIS in this field is of great importance. However as the collection grows, so too is the need for expansion of the archives at AIATSIS and a greater capacity to carry out the digitisation and preservation of these significant collections.

Digitising a plethora of formats

The AIATSIS audiovisual archive consists of multiple analogue and digital formats. Due emphasis is given to the digitising of audiovisual materials. This is a costly and complex process involving both preservation of the collection in numerous old formats, and access to and maintenance of the equipment required to play these formats. It also entails collaboration with the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA).

The AIATSIS collection includes copies of films from external collections and dating from the 1890s, such as scientific and anthropological expeditions to Australia. These provide historical depth and context to the early years of ethnographic filming. AIATSIS does not store nitrocellulose film, the film type used from the 1890s to the 1950s. These materials are stored with the NFSA for safety reasons. Nitrocellulose film is a fire hazard; it is highly flammable, explosive and unstable, eventually deteriorating to the point of spontaneous combustion. Film footage on nitrocellulose that is donated to AIATSIS is transferred for suitable storage at the NFSA, and a copy returned to AIATSIS. The collection includes 8-millimetre and 16-millimetre footage recorded by

church missions, often as evidence of how 'successful' they were and to show how they were run.

A significant proportion of the audiovisual materials collected by AIATSIS is received on a plethora of formats created by researchers and Indigenous community members on home camcorders of varying formats and sizes. These different kinds of tape sizes require differing equipment to play material and therefore require specialised equipment and playback for digitisation of the material. The digitisation effort at AIATSIS is primarily focused on preserving materials on various formats.

Various examples illustrate the invaluable nature of this work. The AIATSIS collection contains an open-spool videotape collection from the Townsville School in Queensland, where Eddie Mabo was a teacher at that time. He was one of the first people to introduce tape-recording equipment into the classroom, to record teaching and the interactions of Indigenous students with teachers. This format was also used and taken up in remote central Australia, and AIATSIS holds a significant collection of footage from land rights meetings, including the very first National Land Rights Conference, which was recorded on Electronic Industries Association of Japan or J-format. The priority for AIATSIS is to digitise these collections. It was not intended that this teaching material would be stored in the long term. In some instances, the tapes were used once, or watched and recorded over. Even though using tapes for re-recording was common, the surviving material comprises a significant and extraordinary body of social and historical documentation. As land rights started to gain political momentum in the 1970s, AIATSIS took on the responsibility to record and document the land rights movement and to send anthropologists to help interpret events.

Collections created by researchers have continued to pose preservation and digitisation challenges. In 2008 AIATSIS received a body of videotapes created by Eric Michaels during his period of fieldwork in the 1980s with the Warlpiri people of central Australia. Using 'a unique methodology and innovative approach to film-making', Michaels researched Warlpiri use of television at the Yuendumu community, which established one of Australia's first Indigenous media centres. The videotapes comprising 60 hours of footage are in the original U-matic format developed by Sony in 1971 and 'required careful conservation treatment'.[15]

Another and more recent example is that of the Northern Territory coastal community of Wadeye, which has worked to preserve their extensive audiovisual collection comprising of 800 VHS tapes, 600 MiniDV tapes and around 100 SVH compact tapes, totalling over 2000 hours of footage. The task of digitising the collection was enormous and, with the assistance of audiovisual preservation specialists including Tom Eccles of AIATSIS, the VHS collection was digitised over several years onsite in Wadeye.[16] Experimenting with digitising the MiniDV collection, it became apparent that the MiniDV tapes were very fragile and it would be too risky to digitise onsite in Wadeye. Due to the high risk of losing the collection, in 2015 AIATSIS agreed to accept the collection and digitised the entire MiniDV collection. The digital MP4 copies were returned to the community in 2018 in order for them to document this incredible collection of the community's linguistic, cultural, sporting and religious life.

These examples provide some detail on the traditional functions of acquisition, cataloguing, conservation, preservation and digitisation by AIATSIS of materials it receives in diverse analogue and digital formats. The examples demonstrate the additional functions

entailed in engaging with community, providing community access and returning materials to community.

Constraints

Equipment to play analogue formats is becoming scarce. To play audiovisual material recorded in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s requires vintage machines from those decades. AIATSIS purchases vintage machines from sources such as eBay. According to Eccles, vintage machines are highly sought after around the globe by collecting institutions. Technical knowledge is being lost as demand for this equipment in the general market decreases. In the meantime, the analogue material is stored in vaults, and with its limited life span it will deteriorate over time. In addition, the machines themselves need a conservation strategy. The machines heads have a limited number of play hours that exceed the number of hours of film in the AIATSIS collection. As equipment becomes scarcer, the cost of purchasing replacement equipment continues to rise and place demands on finite fiscal resources, with the pressing need to preserve valuable cultural material.

Insufficient staff and resources for the scale of the digitisation task precludes the possibility of a whole-of-collection digitisation approach at AIATSIS. Although it had been intended that the entire AIATSIS collection would be digitised, the collection has grown and recent economic constraints have meant the archive now is digitised based on received requests for individual item access rather than a whole-of-collection model of digitisation.

In this respect, AIATSIS is grappling with the compromises to be reached between access requests and a collection-based digitisation model. Such decisions are fundamentally economic, because the institution's capacity is an outcome of securing and managing the funds and resources for collection management planning. Thus the role of funding decisions in knowledge production and use involves value being accorded to digital objects by virtue of the costs involved in their production and maintenance.

According to Wright from the Digital Preservation Coalition, the basic requirements for efficient digitisation entail budgeting for 'a collection level approach' in order to digitise enough material to achieve economies of scale (e.g. International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives, IASA 2009 guidelines recommend 1000 items in a single category) and a division of labour (e.g. equipment operation, metadata, moving and labelling material) to increase efficiency.[17]

This approach, though, does not overcome the need to constantly reinvest in new equipment and upgraded software. One potential solution is to outsource the digitisation process. While companies specialising in moving image digitisation have been established in Canberra, such as DAMSmart, it is often more cost-effective to digitise in-house. However, even under present circumstances, AIATSIS continues to outsource its audiovisual digitisation requirements based on community access and demand. As the need to digitise material currently on magnetic tape becomes more urgent, AIATSIS will see an increase in demands from community-based organisations for assistance with the digitisation and preservation of their collections.

Challenges

Costing models for digitisation of film collections can be complicated and are dependent on the type of film formats, the condition of the format, access to obsolescent players, maintenance of machinery, choice of data formats and a wide range of other factors, including workflow practices and the technology market. There is a danger that parts of the AIATSIS collection will not be digitised before the footage is unplayable. If this happens, AIATSIS staff will have the unenviable task of deciding what footage will be preserved and what footage will not be made available to future generations.[18]

AIATSIS faces other challenges in its management of the audiovisual archive. Digitisation of information and knowledge relating to Indigenous peoples is a complex process that comes with technical, social, cultural and economic costs. Digitisation is, however, only the first step. A collection will remain inaccessible from a research point of view until the collection is catalogued and a synopsis or a time sheet of the footage is provided. AIATSIS staff have become more circumspect regarding the audiovisual materials they will accept into the collection. For instance, AIATSIS is wary of accepting material with onerous access restrictions.

AIATSIS often updates and reviews the audiovisual deposit policy and the types of materials it will accept into the collection. Part of this review process requires depositors to document their deposit as thoroughly as possible. This may mean merely itemising each film or video with a very brief synopsis. There is no requirement for depositors to time-code their deposits. If a depositor would like a financial return on the footage – that is, being able to re-sell footage for commercial purposes – then it is preferable that the collection is time-coded and detailed cataloguing has occurred in order for the collection to be useful commercially. A substantial proportion of the audiovisual collection may not have been accessed since being deposited with AIATSIS. This 'raw' footage often was taken in the field for research purposes and never edited or produced for viewing consumption.

In 2015, AIATSIS estimated that one hour of film requires four hours of preparation time prior to digitisation plus the actual running time of the footage and at least one hour post-digitisation. It also was estimated that AIATSIS held over 10,000 hours of footage, thus requiring at least 60,000 work hours to digitise. Film archiving is complex in that it usually involves tens or even hundreds of sub-components underneath the title. Additionally, the current AIATSIS film catalogue does not allow for those sub-components to be catalogued, identified or described. Much of the knowledge and information contained in the film collection is not discoverable due to the limited availability of metadata.

The costs of storing digitised film at an approved archival standard are substantial. For example, a one-hour film digitised in an uncompressed format can require around 120 gigabytes of digital storage. This is a substantial size and it incurs considerable storage costs. In 2015 a leading Australian data management service quoted a charge of $80 per terabyte (1024 gigabytes) of data storage per annum. As audiovisual archivist Kevin Bradley argues, it has become clear that 'no repository will provide a complete solution to the problems of sustainability, but neither is it

possible to envisage a workable solution that does not incorporate a viable, well-designed, digital repository'.[19]

The at times overwhelming scope of digitisation discussed here overlooks the materials held in communities and the possibilities of community efforts contributing to digitisation.

Importance of community and archives

Australian governments over the past six decades have made substantial investment in the creation of local knowledge content and therefore audiovisual materials in Indigenous communities. The discussion thus far has primarily addressed considerations from within a Western paradigm of acquisition and ownership, conservation and control, and research and use frameworks. The functions and impacts of audiovisual materials being created in Indigenous communities are more diverse, raising other important considerations.

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014–15* recorded that the total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia in 2014 was 686,800, around half of whom were under the age of 20. A review conducted in 2012 on elements of the Council of Australian Governments' initiative *Closing the Gap* designed to improve the life span of Indigenous people posits the role of Indigenous broadcasting and media in supporting well-being in Aboriginal communities.[20] This underscores the value and the complexities of materials generated by communities in supporting policy objectives.

Aboriginal community broadcasting is seen as crucial for the promotion of Aboriginal culture and languages and the communication needs of Aboriginal communities. Throughout the 1970s, Indigenous broadcasting began to grow. This growth came from the community sector, but it was not until the 1980s that more widespread community broadcasting began to develop. Since then, Indigenous broadcasting has grown to include television and over 130 community radio stations. It has established its own unique position in the Australian communications sphere.[21]

Communities that have been broadcasting locally for many years have created analogue content on magnetic tape. This has accumulated over decades and is now valued for its archival content. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiovisual archives held by communities and community-based organisations are a rich repository of language and culture. The purpose of archives is to retain and store information and knowledge for future generations, and the importance of archives in the lives of Aboriginal people is widely acknowledged. Other projects have aimed explicitly to create archives of Aboriginal culture and knowledge. As has been pointed out in relation to the work of Eric Michaels, in contrast to broadcast TV, video was considered an appropriate technology for communities to manage cultural environments, thereby reconstructing older 'corridors of information which had been disrupted'.[22]

At the same time, returning cultural materials preserved in institutions to communities is also valuable.[23] Such information is held in many forms in Aboriginal communities including collections of objects and documents, digital libraries and archives, art collections, oral history, family and community photographs and films, and significant collections of audiovisual recordings of ceremonies, songs and dances, languages and local ecological knowledge. Audiovisual archives in Aboriginal communities

now require a rigorous approach to their management to redefine the way significant and at-risk analogue and digital audiovisual archival material is maintained and made accessible for future generations. Many of these archives are undocumented, stored in unstable environmental conditions and fast deteriorating on magnetic tapes.

The risks to these collections include longer-term issues of degradation and format obsolescence and single-event disasters such as floods, cyclones and fires, so there is a need to develop risk management plans that are both feasible and culturally appropriate to Aboriginal communities. Preservation issues for digital content remain the same as for any type of record that is worth preserving: (1) the significance of the item must be identified and tagged in a way that enables retrieval; (2) there must be a management plan to ensure that the record is kept in accordance with a proper system for retrieval and use, and that the standards of preservation offered by various forms of backup are understood; (3) a risk management strategy needs to be in place to identify current and future risks to the record including risks in the digitisation process and to the digitised master copy, and a disaster preparedness and response plan needs to be formulated and ready for effective activation when needed; and, (4) the content should be preserved in line with an effective preservation strategy. When fragile and at-risk archival material is being digitised for preservation, assessing the condition of the original format prior to digitisation is also critical. In most cases, very little of this is done systematically or consistently to ensure that valuable archival records will be available for future generations.[24]

Working with communities

Skills developed in the production and management of audiovisual archives present significant social and cultural implications. Inge Kral explains how young Indigenous Australian men have acquired media skills with Walpiri media and use facilities to create music videos and cultural documentaries with elders, adding them to the community database and providing access to them on YouTube.[25] This example of digital technology and social media demonstrates a vital component of protecting and preserving Indigenous knowledge in the form of inter-generational maintenance and transfer of knowledge.

A critical factor here is the ability of people in communities to find and access appropriate technical and professional knowledge. There is a role for AIATSIS, NFSA, academics and industry in delivering this technical expertise to regional and remote communities. There is a further need to develop curricula that will align with the broader needs of the long-term management of audiovisual archives.

Managing content in communities is fundamental to archival development, policy and preservation frameworks for Indigenous Australia. The Australian Government investment in this sector over the last 50 years has been substantial. A 2010 review of Australian Government investment in the Indigenous broadcasting and media sector emphasised capacity-building for the sector to take advantage of digital communications technologies.[26] If Indigenous community-based analogue and digital archives are accepted as an integral component of Australia's national heritage, then they must be preserved and conserved for future generations.[27] A key outcome must be to engage the creativity and energy of younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.[28]

AIATSIS, along with NFSA, is one of the first ports of call for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities wishing to preserve or to digitise their old analogue audiovisual collections, in particular the Indigenous media sector. It is critical to explore a national framework in which analogue and digital archives in communities are supported. This includes how digital archives that are held, and are being currently produced, in Aboriginal communities can best be kept for the long term, and it entails appropriate, community-generated protocols and community-based management. Focusing on the development of effective preservation of digital audiovisual archives and community access to knowledge held in the community, there is a need to examine cost-effective, long-term storage and accessibility of these locally held collections.[29]

AIATSIS for some years has been working with communities to improve local capacity in preservation. The audiovisual program in 2001 produced a guide for communities, *Keeping Your History Alive: How to Establish and Maintain an Audiovisual Archive*. It was revised in 2006.[30] While the role of AIATSIS in supporting local community archive collections has been limited by its resources, producing such guides provides a valuable resource for communities maintaining their own audiovisual collections. In this respect, the advice of Copeland and Barreau to create sustainable infrastructure for digital preservation through interoperable systems and standards is germane.[31] In 2015 the Indigenous Remote Communications Association worked with a group of audiovisual archivists and preservation specialists from AIATSIS, NFSA and the Northern Territory Library to create and set minimal archival standards for community audiovisual collections in the framework of a Remote Media National Archiving Strategy.[32] For a strategy to be effective, a commitment to an active implementation plan negotiated with communities is needed.

Valuing knowledge and heritage

The ownership of content and knowledge in Indigenous archives, and the responsibility for transfer of these, involve engagement with Indigenous Australian culture. According to Agrawal, those who possess knowledge have rights to decide how it will be saved and used and by whom, although local preservation is likely to make Indigenous knowledge less freely accessible to outsiders.[33] The distinctive ways in which knowledge is regulated in Aboriginal societies involves various customary laws, such as restrictions on access to knowledge and on who has the right to see and the right to speak for items of customary property. Important forms of knowledge are deemed to be owned by particular social groups.[34] Such considerations need to be built into approaches to preserving and providing access to Indigenous Australian audiovisual archives.

This issue of the value and cost of the distribution of knowledge requires a sophisticated understanding of the expectations of knowledge across various domains. Scott McQuire cites Eric Michaels in highlighting the difference between the social and economic value of wide circulation of images in time and space as a Western construct – whether via commercial or open access – and the contrast with the kinship-based circumscription of knowledge and socially hierarchical regulation of access as required within Aboriginal Australian traditions. 'While there is widespread acceptance of differential access based on capacity to pay,' McQuire observes, 'it seems we are not so used to differential access based on permission to "know".'[35]

The issue of how best to manage audiovisual material to ensure access by source communities, and how to do this sustainably, is an ongoing priority for AIATSIS. Research materials deposited in AIATSIS by researchers – anthropologists, linguists and community researchers – offer great value for Indigenous people for personal, family, community and legal purposes. These materials include field notes, photographs, sound recordings and film and video footage, as well as newsletters and collections deposited by Aboriginal communities. Repatriation of materials from archives to communities who are the subject of this research and documentation requires not just depositing material with communities, it also carries a responsibility to ensure that materials are supported in the community.

Boast, Bravo and Srinivasan suggest that this kind of dichotomy can be resolved to some extent by good research that can support 'information research relationships that are self-sustaining and nurturing between the participant institutions and diverse stakeholder communities'. They argue that such relationships are fundamental to the mission of all public institutions, and can support the development and maintenance of connections while also enabling 'institutions to develop presentations – whether written works, online presentations, or exhibitions – that are more deeply reflective of the cultures from which the objects have been presented'.[36] The issue of where economic value is attributed and resources managed is, however, not dealt with in these optimistic assertions.

Bradley notes, 'in the repositories and digital archives, preservation is increasingly being defined as sustainable access'.[37] Gracy and Kahn suggest that institutions must consider economically sustainable preservation and curation programs; they maintain that 'short-term digital projects often have been well-funded by granting agencies … [while] long-term digital preservation programs have had significant difficulty in sustainability, which includes developing a business case, establishing a business model, and measuring costs'.[38]

Archives and collecting institutions often rely on significant government resources, with funding and public perceptions being key issues. Communicating the value of knowledge archives and their sustainability is essential and the case for economic value has often been made on behalf of collecting institutions. Ten years ago, a study based on the 'user approach' estimated 'that for every dollar invested in the digitisation of cultural collections, $20 of economic benefit was returned'. In 2011, a submission by the National and State Libraries of Australasia drew attention to international experience of the research and economic benefits created by digitisation.[39] Bradley advocates a sustainable, economic approach to digitisation that considers 'whether it is more cost-effective to undertake a certain action in the future, or whether the present is the most economically propitious time to undertake some preventative task'.[40] The needs of future researchers as well as current demands should also be taken into account, with original recordings and collections that are often considered the by-products of research likely to increase in significance over time.[41] The focus on sustainability needs to allow for a range of factors to be 'studied together to build digital libraries that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable'.[42] While AIATSIS is continually giving consideration to the various factors affecting the different sustainability issues of the collection and digital libraries, there also is a focus on the needs of future generations of Aboriginal peoples.

AIATSIS and KALACC

AIATSIS works with communities on a case-by-case basis. One example demonstrating recent developments in practice is an initiative of the University of Melbourne. In 2017 University staff and students visited the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC) to review its collection and to prepare a preliminary catalogue and preservation needs assessment.[43]

KALACC is located in Fitzroy Crossing in the remote northeast of the state of Western Australia. Although it was officially incorporated in 1985, its roots can be traced back to the land rights dispute at Noonkanbah Station from 1978–80. Since its inception KALACC has worked to assist and promote the ceremonies, songs and dance of Kimberley Aboriginal people, to encourage and strengthen their social, cultural and legal values and ensure their traditions a place in Australian society. It has achieved this by coordinating and facilitating cultural festivals and ceremonies, assisting members of the Kimberley Aboriginal community in practising and maintaining their traditional Law and Ceremony, and ensuring that subsequent generations are able to learn and benefit from these traditions. It has also supported the diverse communities across the Fitzroy Valley including maintaining cultural activities, projects for repatriation and reburial of ancestral remains, and youth projects focused on strengthening cultural ties. This work has been conducted with close cooperation between KALACC, the Kimberley Land Council and the Kimberley Language Resource Centre. Many Kimberley community elders are active participants in more than one of these organisations.[44]

The KALACC collection includes paintings on canvas, audiovisual material, paper-based records/archives and photographic material. The needs assessment proposed recommendations to support the long-term management and preservation of KALACC's collection and archives, as well as to optimise the Kimberley community's access to, and utilisation of, relevant areas of the collection. In 2018 a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between AIATSIS and KALACC, with the support of the University of Melbourne. The importance of the materials for the population of the Kimberley region is given recognition through the MoU, and formalises a growing relationship with KALACC. Under the MoU, the audiovisual collection has been transferred to AIATSIS for digitising. A total of 428 individual items were transferred of various format types, including VHS, MiniDV, VHS compact, DVD, Betacam SP and audio cassette, (which excludes additional CDs, DVDs and five external hard drives yet to be catalogued). The original copies will remain at AIATSIS for storage and preservation while digitised copies will be returned to KALACC.[45]

The successful development so far of this initiative establishes a model of collaborative practice for AIATSIS. The MoU ensures the preservation of significant recordings, of community, program activities and important cultural events of Aboriginal people within the Kimberley region. The materials held in community will be a readily available resource for knowledge maintenance and transfer, for traditional cultural practices, and for continuing and innovative art forms.

This case study illustrates the potential for the preservation of materials which continue to play an active role in the preservation and growth of Indigenous Australia's living heritages – a sphere that extends beyond, while simultaneously

functioning within, a 'Western tradition' concerning circulation of knowledge. The benefits from a variety of perspectives for community engagement in cultural activities and the maintenance of culture for community are inestimable. The KALACC and AIATSIS MoU supports and strengthens the cultural governance of both organisations.

The 2025 Plan and beyond

The initiative in the early 1960s to establish a national collection of Australia's heritage of First Nations peoples and cultures has created a wonderful body of material. Over the past six decades, the vision and paradigm of the 1960s era has been infused with the values and world views of Indigenous Australians, creating the cross-cultural amalgam that is the unique organisation known today as AIATSIS.

The AIATSIS collection numbering more than a million items is constantly growing. AIATSIS in 2009 prepared the 2025 Plan for the near future. Even so, there is a real risk that many materials will be lost. A UNESCO report in 2015 asserts that 'Much of world's audiovisual heritage has already been irrevocably lost through neglect, destruction, decay and the lack of resources, skills, and structures', and calls for concerted international action to preserve what remains.[46]

In 2017 the NFSA made public its concern about the need for swift action 'to avoid a cultural calamity affecting future generations of Australians'. As the 2025 deadline for the preservation of audiovisual material nears, it anticipates that at current rates of investment in digitisation only about 30% of magnetic tape can be saved. It called for a National Framework for Digitisation of Audiovisual Collections.[47] The NFSA also has prepared a digitisation strategy for the period 2018–25 seeking to establish a National Centre of Excellence in Audiovisual Digitisation 'to ensure the long-term preservation of the NFSA's audiovisual collection, to support all audiovisual heritage collection holders and to make sure that people engage with, learn from and use Australia's audiovisual heritage in a digital format'.[48]

The AIATSIS collection, policies and programs highlight the complexities of managing audiovisual collections and the processes that are involved in acquisition, curation, conservation, preservation and access. Digitisation is a pressing priority demanding urgent attention. But it is a legacy priority of twentieth-century technology in a twentieth-century Western archival collection model. The engagement of AIATSIS with Indigenous communities such as KALACC demonstrates the impetus for and the potential capacity of an innovative cross-cultural fusion model for the twenty-first century.

As 2025 fast approaches, a new strategic national framework for the future is needed where our peak Australian organisations demonstrate collaborative leadership in the digitisation of magnetic tapes mostly used by Indigenous communities over the past half century. This means engaging with regional and remote media and cultural organisations in practical ways. These include sharing expertise on the maintenance of obsolete playback equipment; coordinating the purchasing, sharing and transferring of new equipment for digitisation; producing and maintaining up-to-date digitisation guides for community-based organisations; entering into agreements with community-based organisations wishing to donate collections; and,

guiding communities towards best practice with reliable hardware and software for maintaining their digital collections. Leadership based on coordinated partnership of national institutions with community-based organisations is vital if we are to preserve and develop the audiovisual heritage of Australia's First Nations peoples for the twenty-first century.

Any new national framework and action plan, however, will be incomplete until it adequately incorporates and promotes the unique values, outlooks and contributions of First Nations citizens. Their roles as archivists and curators transcend the usual norms because they also seek to fulfil continuing cultural responsibilities as custodians and practitioners of ancient traditions while simultaneously negotiating twenty-first-century technologies. This places particular obligations on governments and agencies such as AIATSIS and NFSA above and beyond the obligations ordinarily required of national collection bodies. Collaboration with Indigenous Australia requires institutional leadership that actively initiates and nurtures new models of partnerships that seek to facilitate the economic, archival, cultural and heritage ambitions of First Nations Australians. The AIATSIS collection must be a high priority for the Commonwealth Government and all stakeholders, especially as we approach 2025 and as more Indigenous communities are looking to AIATSIS for assistance in digitising and preserving their collections.

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