



REFLECTION ARTICLE

Hunters and Collectors: The Work of ABC's News Libraries Across Archives and TV News Production

Benjamin Pask

Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, NSW, Australia

Abstract

This reflection aims to acknowledge and celebrate the work of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's TV News Libraries in the wake of their closure in December 2022 as part of an ABC Archives restructure.

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Television news libraries have two primary functions: to archive news/current affairs content and to supply audiovisual material for reporters to tell their stories. Working across the disparate sectors of archives and news production, the scope of their work may not be fully appreciated by either. With ABC closing its TV News Libraries in December 2022, I wish to acknowledge their achievements by presenting an overview of their duties and to reflect upon my time as a News Library Cataloguer and Researcher based in ABC's Ultimo Centre in Sydney. This is a reflection on my singular experiences in the role, and does not seek to represent the corporation nor my former colleagues.

The archival work undertaken by News Libraries focused around collecting three strands of audiovisual material: off-air recordings of news/current affairs broadcasts, 'edit master' versions of news/current affairs stories, and the raw material generated in the process of newsgathering.

Unlike off-air recordings, edit master versions of stories are 'clean' copies without 'supers' (i.e., on-screen text identifying personalities, locations, etc.). Audio elements may be split across separate channels, making it possible for editors reusing parts of these stories to mute a reporter or contributor's voice while retaining natural background sound. These features make edit masters a useful production asset, and they were catalogued with considerable detail.

The expansion of news/current affairs into online media presented a challenge to News Libraries, with stories frequently published in several iterations across multiple platforms and bulletins. This required libraries to identify and retain the optimal version of a story, which may be the longest version, or that with the most unique ABC-owned material.

*Correspondence: Benjamin Pask, Email: benpask@gmail.com

News Libraries also selected raw camera material to retain as library assets, a process that involved removing superfluous content (e.g., ‘colour bar’ test patterns), adding metadata, applying standardized naming and archiving to protected folders. When I joined the ABC in 2009, TV News was transitioning to tapeless production and the Library was selecting material from a handful of camera tapes and files every day. The volume of material passing through ABC newsrooms expanded massively over the past decade, and at my time of departure in December 2022, we were selecting from over 200 items daily in Sydney alone. This included not only footage shot by ABC’s outstanding news crews in Australia and across the world, but those of other newsgathering services – public service and commercial – who share footage as part of news pool agreements. This ‘pool footage’ can often be retained, reused and sold in the same way as that originating from ABC crews and forms a sizable part of this collection.

News Libraries were attached to ABC newsrooms in state and territory capitals across Australia. Each library collected material unique to their location, with librarians bringing local knowledge to their selection and cataloguing of raw media. Special mention must be made of Canberra’s News Library, whose exhaustive collection of Australian federal politics complements the work carried out by the Parliamentary Library. Each state and territory library’s collection can be accessed by their counterparts across the country.

ABC News Libraries’ collection of raw media neatly illustrates the critical importance of professionally applied metadata. Consider, for instance, the news pool helicopter that takes off from Sydney every day to gather an hour or two of footage through the bubble-mounted camera on its undercarriage. Its meandering journey tends to be dominated by the waterways over which aviation law dictates the chopper must, where possible, fly. There is limited value in retaining this daily flight in its unexamined raw state but identifying, isolating and adding relevant metadata to any news events recorded (e.g., a flood in a specific location, a road accident or a crime scene), as well as any notable footage captured along the way (e.g., a wedge-tailed eagle soaring on the updraft of a bushfire, a new suburb springing up along the urban fringe, a Royal Australian Navy (RAN) warship sailing to dock at Garden Island) can convert this rough material into a valued resource. Experienced News Librarians took their knowledge of the existing collection to the practice of selection, seeking to retain material that updated and expanded the archive, maximizing the value of footage shot by newsgathering crews, and broadening the resources at hand when responding to journalists’ requests for footage.

This collection may be the News Libraries’ greatest legacy. It is not only a valuable production asset, but a national treasure offering an unfiltered window into Australian life, from bushfires and pandemics to leadership spills and mullet festivals. It is an order of magnitude more objective than broadcast news, largely avoiding accusations of bias directed at edited storytelling. There are, of course, factors influencing what a camera operator records and what a News Library opts to retain, but there is an undeniable streak of veracity running through this collection.

The Libraries’ professional selection practices and application of metadata transformed this raw media into a legacy of hundreds of thousands of archival assets. This is not some rarely opened vault representing bygone times, but a living collection in constant expansion and daily use. You can see some of it this evening, on the *7pm News*.

Library footage is a major and essential component of television news and current affairs, and ABC News Library researchers worked rostered shifts across mornings, evenings and weekends to support different bulletins and supply this footage to content makers. Library footage is present in most news/current affairs stories. It is the crime scene shown in a report on a court case; it is the accused walking outside court and the aerial shot of a prison used in a later report on their sentencing. It constitutes the majority of many types of story: obituaries, political retirements, ‘backgrounders’ on historical or current events, or profiles of public figures.

Research requests for library footage came from journalists, editors or producers and were immensely variable in scope, scale and subject. A politics reporter may ask for a specific quote ('... can I have Tony Burke's presser from 1 November 2022, when he says...') or a non-specific quote ('... can I have a cabinet minister saying *something like*...') and so a working knowledge of Hansard and awareness of speech transcript resources was useful. Reporters may request a specific location ('... can I have federal parliament exteriors...') or a specific location with a qualitative modifier ('... can I have a *guilty building* shot of federal parliament...'). A 'guilty building' describes a low-angle shot in crepuscular conditions, possibly with some unidentifiable silhouetted ne'er-do-wells in the frame. 'Guilty building' shots of federal parliament, it will surprise no-one to learn, are of greater value to a News Library than a 'hopeful' shot of the building bathed in a glorious rose-tinted sunrise.

Despite the breadth of ABC's own archives, it was often necessary to search for footage outside the corporation. ABC has usage agreements with several international press agencies, while C-SPAN and the White House's YouTube channel became increasingly useful as coverage of USA politics ballooned over recent years. State and federal parliamentary libraries were an outstanding resource, while user-generated content (UGC) also had its place, particularly in events such as natural disasters where smartphone-wielding first responders and local residents recorded dramatic pictures ahead of news crews.

News Librarians had to be cognisant of any rights or restrictions related to footage sought by content-makers, holding third-party (i.e., non-ABC) material up to particular scrutiny. Footage germane to a story may be permissible under Fair Dealing for reporting of News,¹ but this is by no means a universal get-out clause allowing kleptomaniacal footage-grabbing. ABC newsrooms have access to a legal team with rights expertise, but outside of core business hours such advice was often provided by News Library researchers.

Third-party material frequently brought technical difficulties alongside rights issues. ABC News Library researchers became adept at the messy business of downloading embedded online videos and wrangling these troublesome files into news production systems. News Librarians demonstrated expertise across these systems, troubleshooting technical issues and facilitating file transfers between ABC sites.

'Overlay' became an increasingly common term in research requests after the launch of ABC's 24-hour news channel in 2010. 'Overlay' describes establishing footage of a news event, location or personality that will *overlay* (i.e., be screened over) a reporter, presenter or interview subject's voice. Preferred overlay of a personality shows them walking, working at a desk or close-mouthed in a cutaway from a press conference. Close-mouthed because, if they are shown talking, it can lead to the dissonant 'goldfishing' effect where the voiceover appears to originate from the subject's lips.

With its busy roster of guests and experts, ABC's news channel had a constant hunger for overlay, with some typical requests as follows:

'We've got the amphibian keeper from Taronga Zoo on the 11am bulletin. We're gonna need some overlay of Australia's threatened frog species'. This is a straightforward one – find the frogs.

'There's a population expert coming on. Can we please get overlay of, um, people doing... stuff, I guess?' A vague request like this can be deceptively tricky. ABC News endeavours to represent Australia in all its diversity, and the researcher must reflect this in their choices.

Mark Seymour from Hunters & Collectors is coming onto The Drum this evening to talk about the state of live music in Australian cities. Can we please get some of their video clips, maybe some live performances, and some recent pics of newer bands playing smaller venues?

Time to dive into the *Rage* database for those music videos, as well as searching for any performances on programs such as *Countdown* while checking for any library footage showing the live music scene around Australia.

‘*Our guest at Midday will be discussing Australia Day. Can we please get some celebrations, maybe some barbecues, Hottest 100 parties, some Invasion Day protests, and some shots of the First Fleet arriving?*’ Yes, yes, yes, yes and... a News Library researcher should try to avoid saying ‘no’. We could, then, explain that the First Fleet arrived a century or so before the moving image while offering some footage of historical drawings and watercolours depicting the colonists’ landing.

Television news is unpredictable. Research will be busy, and it will be last minute. ABC’s Ultimo Centre in Sydney houses a videotape vault two floors above the News Library’s former location. Sometimes, when a story breaks with minutes to the bulletin, that archival vault airlock takes twice as long as usual to open and those compactus handles cannot spin fast enough before the researcher runs, tape in hand and gasping for breath, to ingest that much-needed library footage into the news system with seconds to spare and an impatient phone ringing. Television newsrooms can crackle with energy, and there were many occasions when the News Library phone was lifted to hear a voice shaking with adrenaline.

Perhaps the *Archives and Manuscripts* reader shudders at this. I know that I did. When setting out on a career in archives I had an image of myself alone with a Steenbeck² and stack of film cans in a dimly lit room, engrossed in contemplative, detail-oriented work. I dreaded scenarios like that of the previous paragraph and was hesitant to take a position in the News Library. It could be high-adrenaline, high-stakes work. I did not want to ‘break the news’ (in the sense of somehow preventing it from going to air).

And so I was astonished to find myself loving it. I loved hearing that adrenalized voice on the other end of the phone melt with relief as we got the library footage to make their story. I loved seeing our work on ABC’s flagship news and current affairs programs moments after we had provided it. I loved being part of the stories that defined our nation – gathering around a newsroom monitor as a prime minister is usurped, helping an editor find the perfect shot to bring a lead story to life, or smelling bushfire smoke as I passed a reporter’s desk – but most of all I loved working with my fellow News Librarians. This team of great experience and diverse expertise was supportive, collaborative and indefatigable in their commitment to finding the best possible footage to tell a news story.

At least twenty archive professionals lost ABC News Library positions at the end of 2022, with management pushing a self-service research model onto newsrooms, and much of their archival work shifted to automated processes. I wish my few remaining colleagues the best in the challenging circumstances of their continuing employment, and hope that these cuts do not precipitate the decline in journalistic and archival standards anticipated by ALIA, the ASA,³ and many other individuals and professional organisations.

Notes

1. Australian Copyright Council, Information Sheet G079v09, p. 4, available at <https://www.copyright.org.au/browse/book/ACC-Fair-Dealing:-What-Can-I-Use-Without-Permission-INFO079>, accessed 18 January 2023.
2. Steenbeck is a brand of film editor machine favoured by film archives for viewing 16 mm and 35 mm film material, available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steenbeck>, accessed 18 January 2023.
3. Australian Library and Information Association: Open letter on proposed cuts to ABC library and archive professional roles, available at <https://www.alia.org.au/Web/News/Articles/2022/June-2022/Open-letter-on-proposed-cuts-to-ABC.aspx>, accessed 19 January 2023.