

Archives and Sound Archives — What's the Difference?

David Roberts

This paper was presented at the fifth Annual Conference of the Australian Branch of the International Association of Sound Archives, held in Sydney on 25-27 August, 1984. The paper examines the similarities and differences between archives in general and sound archives, by discussing aspects of archival theory, archival and technical practice, and administrative arrangements. Particular emphasis is placed on systems of arrangement and control and examples are drawn from both traditional and non-traditional archival formats. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the impact of new technology on the nature and treatment of archives in different formats.

Let me emphasise, first of all, that this is very much a personal view, and does not in any way reflect the official views of my employing institution, the Australian Archives. Naturally, I will be using a few examples from the holdings of the Australian Archives, being the material with which I am most familiar.

I want to compare sound archives with archives in general in a number of different ways. I will be looking firstly at what we mean by 'archives' and 'sound archives'; secondly, I will discuss what we might call 'intellectual control': description, arrangement, finding aids and the relationship between sound archives and archives in other formats in this context; thirdly, I will look at the physical features and needs of sound archives, and I will ask how much they differ from those of other archival formats; fourthly, I want to look at administrative arrangements for managing sound archives; and, to finish up, I will look into the future, at the impact of new technology on this question.

Archives and Sound Archives

Let me commence this paper with a definition. I propose to define 'sound archives' as 'archives in the form of sound recordings'. That may seem self-evident, but let us look at what we mean by 'archives'. The word has its origin in the ancient Greek 'arkheia', meaning 'public office', rather than, as might be expected, in 'arkaikos', meaning 'ancient'. Sir Hilary Jenkinson defined an archive as having been created, accumulated and/or used 'in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether

public or private) of which itself formed a part'.¹ Charles Johnson defined archives as being records 'no longer in current use, each group of which has accrued in the custody of an individual or a department in the ordinary course of business, and forms an organic whole, reflecting the organisation and history of the office which produced it'.² The *Archives Act*, 1960, governing the archives of the State of New South Wales defines 'public archives' as 'all public records that have ceased to be in current use in the public office in which they were originally made or received or in the public office in whose custody they have been placed after being so made or received'.³

The point which I want to draw out of those definitions is that sound archives which are properly 'archival' in this sense of the term are a result of processes by which organisations, public or private, or individuals, carry out their functions and, hence, document or are evidence of the carrying out of those functions.

Such sound recordings may have played a central role in the carrying out of a particular function; for example, the Australian Archives holds many recordings from the Commonwealth Government's Advertising Service⁴: recordings created by that agency in the process of carrying out its primary function of advertising for the Commonwealth. On the other hand, sound archive material may merely have been incidental or have played a very small role in the carrying out of a particular function; for example, a recording held by the Australian Archives of a speech by the Minister for Munitions made in 1941 for distribution to munitions factories, to encourage the workers' efforts.⁵

This brings us to the first distinction that I want to make: the distinction between sound archives which are archival in nature in the sense in which I have described the term, and 'sound archives' in the broader, looser sense: meaning any sound recordings of value or historical importance, whatever their nature and origin, and even meaning institutions which deal with such recordings.

Typically, sound archives in this second sense comprise artificial collections that have been brought together or created by an institution because, for example, they relate to a particular subject area with which the institution is concerned. Examples here include collections of recordings of oral history, natural history, linguistics and anthropology; collections of commercial recordings maintained by libraries and educational institutions, and so on.

By 'artificial' I do not mean to be critical. I mean that such collections do not come from an original administrative or functional context, and they do not have a pre-existing system of arrangement and control, as is the case with truly 'archival' sound archives. Typically, they are managed using library-type methods: individual recordings are catalogued and indexed

separately — they are treated as discrete items, in contrast with archival methods of intellectual control. It is in the strictly archival sense that I will mainly use the term ‘sound archives’ in this paper.

Intellectual Control

It is not my intention, however, to compare the different ways in which sound archives, however we want to define them, can be treated. Rather, I want to compare sound archives with archives in other formats.

Let us look first of all at the principles which govern the intellectual treatment of all archives. There are two fundamental principles which are universally accepted by archivists as forming the basis for archival systems of description and arrangement. Briefly, under the principle of provenance, archives are arranged and listed according to the organisation, or individual, which created or accumulated them. Secondly, under the principle of original order, archivists keep archives in the order in which they were created, kept and used. No archival item was created or exists in a vacuum: it will be related to other items, perhaps in the same series or in other series; it shares a common origin with other archival items created by the same organisation and, with other items, will be evidence of the carrying out of the same functions. Archivists consider it to be essential to the understanding of any archival item or series to understand the context in which it was created, in terms of the organisation creating it, the function it performed, and the other archives to which it relates. If you like, it is the equivalent of the physical reclamation and treatment of a recording. The technical expert seeks a result which sounds as close as possible to the way the recording, or the event that was recorded, originally sounded: he seeks to re-create its original physical context. In the same way, the sound archivist seeks to re-create the recording’s historical and functional context by applying the principles of provenance and original order.

I would like to make three points concerning the application of these archival principles to sound archives.

My first point relates to the kinds of finding aids which archival institutions produce. Most archival finding aids describe the records of a particular body or ‘record group’, or, in the case of finding aids which cover the records of more than one record group, such as a summary guide to the whole of an institution’s holdings, they are arranged by record group, in accordance with the principle of provenance. As a supplement to such provenance-based finding aids, some archival institutions produce subject guides, in which the records relating to a particular subject from a variety of sources in the institution’s holdings are brought together, at least on paper.

While sound archives will, of course, appear in such finding aids along with the archives in other media, there is a case for producing a further

kind of finding aid: a media guide, describing, in the case of sound archives, all of an institution's holdings of sound recordings. Such a guide will answer the specific needs of the researcher who is primarily interested in material in a particular format, or who has insufficient information about the recording sought to be available to find it easily using a provenance approach. More importantly, however, it provides a convenient starting point for a researcher interested in a particular subject in which sound archives play a major role, as the entries in the media guide can then be used to identify related material in other formats, using the institution's principal finding aids.

In what ways does the description of sound archives differ from the description of other forms of archives? At the series level, an adequate physical description of the kinds of items which make up the series is an essential part of describing material in any media. It is at the item that the differences begin to emerge. In the case of multi-format sound archives series, for example, a series comprising gramophone recordings of different sizes, speeds and compositions, there has to be a convenient shorthand means of describing the physical characteristics of each item listed for the series. Therefore, an inventory of items for sound archives should include columns for the format, size and speed of each item, which can be filled using an appropriate symbol. With a file or a volume, the number of folios or the thickness in centimetres of the item is a good indication of how much information is in it and how long it will take the researcher to get through it. With sound recordings, of course, the important thing is how long it will take to play: so 'duration' will need to replace quantity in the description of a sound archive item.

With traditional items, the item is normally unique and, with the exception of only the most heavily used series — which tend to be microfilmed — it is the original item that is examined by the researcher. With sound archives, the production of copies — preservation, dubbing and reference copies — plays a vital role in the preservation of the original recording. Item level description of sound archives, therefore, has to make provision for recording the copies that have been made: a simple code will do, to indicate each type of copy. By including this information in item-level finding aids, a researcher can see immediately whether a reference copy exists and therefore whether the item is immediately accessible, or whether a request for the production of such a copy will have to be made.

Information about copies is also a useful management tool, permitting the sound archivist to plan or keep track of progress in copying projects.

In summary, then, the description of sound archives can follow normal archival practices, with appropriate changes made to take account of the characteristics of the medium.

The final point that I want to make in this area is that sound archives, in the strictly archival sense, seldom exist in isolation. There will almost

invariably exist related records in other formats which add to the understanding of or provide a background for, sound recordings, and which originate from the same source.

Such related records may relate very closely to the sound recordings; for example, the music scores used in a recorded performance or the scripts used in a radio serial: they may have a more general relationship with the recordings, such as files of listeners' letters generated by a controversial or popular radio programme, or publicity photographs of artists; or they may provide a general understanding of the context in which the recording was made; for example, the policy and administrative files of the body or production unit from which the recording originated or records concerning the payment of royalties for recording a musical or dramatic work. Nor will such related records necessarily be in the form of traditional paper records: an example from the Australian Archives' holdings which springs to mind is the model of the sets used in several of the ABC's televised operas⁶ for which the original sound tapes are also held; sound archives in the form of film sound tracks will obviously relate closely to the films for which they were made.

All these related records in different formats, originating from the same source, having the same provenance, form an archival whole, and it is important that our descriptive practices, finding aids and indeed our custodial arrangements should respect the integrity of the archival whole.

Physical Aspects

It is sometimes said that the physical characteristics of sound archives and hence their needs in terms of preservation place them apart from archives in other formats. I would like to test that assertion by comparing the different physical formats that we find in sound archives and their preservation needs, with those of other kinds of archives.

In this context, I propose to divide sound recordings into four groups of formats:

- (1) Gramophone-type recordings
- (2) Magnetic tape recordings
- (3) Laser discs and
- (4) Piano rolls

Let us look at each in turn.

Gramophone recordings, by which I mean recordings which revolve and require physical contact between the recording and a stylus, including historical formats, such as wax cylinder, are probably the most singular of these groups of formats, in that the technology has been applied very little outside the recording of sound. I say very little because the first videodisc that I know of, developed by Baird in the late 1920's, used this sort of technology. More recently, RCA worked for a number of years on a

videodisc using a stylus in physical contact with the recording, although they have now given it up as a lost cause. Briefly, gramophone recordings are susceptible to damage due to extremes of temperature and humidity, inappropriate storage — horizontal or diagonal rather than vertical, poor handling, wear as a consequence of use, and deterioration on the shelves with the passage of time. Naturally, the damage from particular sources depends to an extent on the kind of gramophone recording. By and large, however, the essential conditions required for the long-term storage of gramophone recordings are little different from those required for the long-term storage of paper records. A stable temperature of around 21 degrees Celsius and a stable relative humidity of around 50% will provide good prospects for long-term preservation for both paper and gramophone recordings.

To be kept upright, gramophone recordings require closely spaced dividers of the shelves. This can be done using shelving with dividers specially built in, or by using boxes specially designed for this role, such as the Australian Archives' type 12 box. The advantage of the latter arrangement is that it permits standard repository shelving to be used for the safe storage of gramophone discs without incurring the cost of conversion: the advantages for space management in a multi-media repository are obvious.

Of course, there are other aspects of the preservation of gramophone recordings which are quite unique to that format. Copying and reclamation requires a whole array of specialised playback, noise reduction and recording equipment. The need for careful handling and the danger of accidents are perhaps more acute than with any other format. But the point that I want to make is that, at least in terms of the basic storage conditions which archival institutions have to be able to provide, the similarity between the needs of gramophone and of traditional paper archives is much closer than we might think.

By contrast to gramophone recordings, magnetic tape is by no means uniquely used for recording sound. Video tape is rapidly replacing film as the principal medium for recording moving images in television broadcasting, in domestic use, and in government and business; for example, for training and publicity. Needless to say, video tape is increasingly finding its way into archival institutions. Until recently, magnetic tape has been the principal recording medium in the world of computers, and the vast majority of machine-readable records in archival institutions are still in the form of magnetic tape, in various sizes and formats, rather than the newer discs. I do not propose to discuss here the preservation needs of magnetic tape. The point that I want to make is that those preservation needs, and the facilities which have to be provided in order to satisfy them are essentially the same, whether the magnetic tape has been used for recording sound, moving images or data.

The digital laser disc is another technology used for recording sound but whose applications go far beyond sound.

The Philips system was originally developed for video, and despite a shaky start, the videodisc is showing great promise especially in the commercial world, while the face of education seems certain to be revolutionised by the development of interactive videodiscs. Toshiba are currently marketing a document storage and retrieval system based on the digital laser disc: it is a read-write system whereby the image of a document is recorded on the disc, with access possible on a VDU or hard copy — essentially, it is designed to perform the role currently played by microfilm, only with vast improvements in storage capacity and in the speed and ease of access.

There has also been much work on the possible uses of laser discs in computer applications, where their extraordinary packing densities and rapid access are obvious attractions, and we may well see the use of laser discs in the not too distant future in this area as well.

Again, I do not intend to examine the preservation needs of digital laser discs. Rather, I want to make the point here that it is essentially the same technology that is being used, and hence the same requirements for physical preservation, whether it is for recording sound, moving images, documents or data.

Even the old piano roll is not all that unique: it has equivalents in the computer world, in the computer punch card. And, of course, the considerations involved in its physical preservation are the same as those involved in the preservation of any other paper records.

So what does all this tell us about the physical nature of sound archives and their preservation needs, as opposed to those of archives in other formats? It shows us first of all that, physically, sound archives are anything but homogeneous, and indeed that some sound archive formats have a great deal more in common with formats outside the area of sound archives than with other sound archive formats. Secondly, it follows that much of the preservation needs of sound archives are identical to those of archives in other formats, as hence, are the facilities required to satisfy those needs.

Administrative Arrangements

The administrative arrangements — the organisational structures which we set up to manage our holdings of sound archives — have been the subject of a number of recent developments, both here and overseas. In this part of my paper, I want to examine some of the issues which determine what types of institutions have responsibility for sound archives. Both the number of institutions which hold sound archives and the range of models into which they can be categorised are large. *Our Heritage, a directory to archives and manuscript repositories in Australia*, published by the

Australian Society of Archivists,⁷ records some 96 institutions in this country with holdings of sound archives. While time will not permit me to examine in any detail the different types of sound archive institutions to be found in Australia and overseas, I must at least mention some broad categories:

- (1) The national sound archive model: which seeks to establish a large and comprehensive collection of material of national significance and seeks to ensure adequate resources for its task by concerning itself only with sound recordings, and perhaps a small quantity of closely related material in other formats
- (2) The specialised sound archive model: again concerned primarily with sound recordings, and established to serve user demand in a particular subject area
- (3) The sound archive collection within a subject — specialised institution with holdings in other formats
- (4) The multi-media institution, such as national and state libraries, with separate media-based collections
- (5) The sound archive unit within, for example, broadcasting organisations, established specifically to preserve and provide the organisation's own material as a program resource
- (6) National, state and local government archives which preserve government records both for future administrative need and for public research, and which have sound recordings among their holdings because they are public records as much as records in any other media
- (7) and finally, a whole range of corporate, university and church archives which hold sound material for much the same reasons as government archives.

What are some of the issues which determine the broad shape of these institutions? I would like to identify two such issues and discuss them briefly.

First of all, there is the issue of whether sound archives will be better served by an institution which specialises in the medium of sound recordings or by an institution with holdings in a variety of media.

A number of arguments can be put forward favouring the idea of the institution specialising in sound archives work. It can be argued that the facilities required to preserve and provide access to sound archives are sufficiently different from those required for archives in other formats to warrant the development of separate facilities with an accompanying administrative structure. It can also be argued that such an institution will attract and develop competent and committed professional staff by

providing a career path within the sound archive specialisation. It can be argued that researchers interested in using sound archives will find it easier to deal with a single institution and a single system of finding aids, rather than visiting a number of multi-media institutions. And, finally, there is the danger that the sound archives within a multi-media institution will be allocated inadequate resources in favour of some of the other media.

On the other side of the coin, it can be argued, as I demonstrated earlier in this paper, that the facilities required for the preservation of sound archives have a great deal in common with those required for other archival media, and, hence, present that much less of a problem to a multi-media institution. A multi-media institution can attract and develop professional archivists with not only an understanding of sound archives but of their relationship with related records in other media, which can only be of benefit to researchers. In my experience, researchers tend to be interested in a topic, a subject, rather than a single archival medium, and hence are pleased to be able to use related material in different media, and to find them and their interrelationships described in integrated finding aids.

Finally, on the matter of resources, apart from the economics of sharing the administrative burden, I think that it is only when you work with archives in more than one format that you realise that resources are very scarce for the management of all archival media: a problem which insisting on sound archives having the top priority will not solve. It can be argued that a broad and balanced outlook on the part of archival managers will ensure that biases in favour of particular media do not adversely affect the allocation of resources to sound archives within a multi-media institution.

How can we reconcile these two approaches? I think the answer has to be that there is room for both approaches in the sound archives world, and the principal determinant as to which is more appropriate will be the nature and the origin of the sound recordings with which we are concerned. Sound archives which are strictly archival in nature, and which have related records in other formats from the same provenance must clearly be the responsibility of the multi-media archival institutions. Collections of recordings with no such relationship with other material: independent or artificial collections, may well benefit from being held by an institution specialising in sound archives work. The other issue in this area that I would like to discuss is the idea of concentrating holdings of sound recordings in large centralised national sound archives institutions as against the administrative, geographical and constitutional or legislative considerations which require a pluralistic approach. The idea of a centralised, comprehensive collection has a certain attraction: it implies the efficient use of resources and talent; it implies good news for researchers, with "one-stop" service; and it implies a certain stature, a glamour on the international scene, because of its size and comprehensiveness. But the

notion has a number of limitations.

Sound archives, like any other archives — if they are truly archival in nature — are likely to have a continuing administrative value to their originating body, for example, in broadcasting, as a program resource. That value will be greatly diminished if the concentration of holdings into one or two centres by a national institution inhibits access to sound recordings by their owners. This will be compounded if the archival institution claims ownership rather than mere custody of the material.

Secondly, the monolithic approach fails to recognise that not all sound archives are of national significance. Material can be of state or local significance, or of importance to particular groups in our community, and it would be wrong to alienate that material by requiring its deposit in a distant institution.

Finally, the federal nature of the commonwealth gives the states a legitimate responsibility for their cultural heritage including the sound archives in state archives and libraries: a responsibility which they will have no desire to relinquish. Equally, a number of Australian institutions with sound archives holdings have well-established responsibilities towards their clients, both depositors and users, responsibilities enshrined in legislation and major investments of resources.

Again, I think we have to agree that there is room for both approaches. There can be little doubt that collections of private sound archive material of national significance should be concentrated in a national institution. Equally, arrangements for sound archives of a more localised significance must clearly be made at a level which will serve the needs of the people with a special interest in them; while public records in the form of sound archives must remain the responsibility of the official archives of the governments which created them.

The Future

In the last part of this paper, I would like to make a couple of observations about the impact of new technology on the relationship between sound archives and other archives.

Digital recording, in particular the digital laser disc, will inevitably have a major impact on sound archives work. Besides permitting an extraordinarily high quality in recording and reproduction, the laser disc may well prove to be a more durable medium for storing recorded sound than previous formats. Perhaps more importantly, the digital nature of the encoding will permit the endless re-recording of sound archive material without any loss of quality.

Equally, the fact that replaying the disc involves no wear will mean that making preservation, dubbing and reference copies from the master recording will no longer be necessary. All that will be required will be a copy available for reference and a security copy.

As a result, sound archivists will need to concern themselves far less with the physical preservation of their holdings. They will be able to devote correspondingly more time — especially with the help of ADP, to improving the intellectual control of their holdings, and hence the accessibility of the material to researchers.

However, another aspect of digital laser technology may have a far greater impact on sound archives. With recent and current developments we are now facing for the first time the prospect of essentially one technology being widely used for recording information of all kinds. With the development of the compact disc, the video disc, the document storage disc, and so on, the technologies are merging, and we have every reason to expect that they will continue to do so.

Not only will we use the same kind of disc to record sound, still and moving images, text and data, but they will be mixed and fused on the very same disc. The distinction between these different kinds of information, until now secured by differences in physical format, will blur.

I would venture to suggest as my parting shot, that, as the distinction between different formats of records — and hence of archives — becomes less and less relevant, so will the need for different institutions based on record formats become less relevant, as indeed will the distinctions between different parts of the archival profession. Perhaps then we will really have to ask ourselves: "Archives and sound archives — what's the difference?"

FOOTNOTES

1. Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archives Administration*. London, Lund Humphries, 1966, p.11.
2. Charles Johnson, *The Care of Documents and Management of Archives*. London, SPCK, 1919, pp.8-9.
3. New South Wales *Archives Act*, No. 46, 1960, s.2(1).
4. Australian Archives: Commonwealth Advertising Division, Department of the Treasury, New South Wales; CRS C199, Sound recordings of radio commercials produced for Commonwealth agencies, ?1947-?1960.
5. Australian Archives: Small Arms Factory, Lithgow, New South Wales: CRS C96, Sound recording of speech by Minister of Munitions, 1941.
6. Australian Archives: Australian Broadcasting Commission, Head Office; SP 1428/1, Models — Designs for ABC television productions, 1973-1975.
7. O. White, A.M. Schwirtlich, J. Nash, *Our Heritage: A Directory to Archives and Manuscript Repositories in Australia*, Australian Society of Archivists, Inc., 1983, pp.279-282.