

Sex and Politics: The Eros Foundation Archive

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Craig Brittain is the Liaison Librarian for Women's Studies at Flinders University in Adelaide. He has worked in libraries since 1977 and has been involved with censorship issues since the late 1970s, when he was given the job of ensuring the State Library of South Australia conformed with requirements of State and Federal Classification Acts. In 1997 he was responsible for obtaining the Eros Foundation Archive for Flinders University Library.

Providing a home for a sex industry archives in a university can be seen as giving tacit or overt approval or legitimisation to the industry. It is important to be able to explain and justify its existence to critics within and without the University. This paper was originally delivered at the Australian Society of Archivists Conference in Sydney in August 2002 and published on a CD-ROM of the conference proceedings.

This paper is about finding a place for the archives of an industry that many people think has *no* place in respectable society, and the problems associated with it. There are always going to be difficulties involved in providing a home for a sex industry archives in a conservative institution like a university.

Over the years I've run into three main types of problems. The first are what might loosely be described as cultural: that derive from the political and religious convictions of the people I work with, and the understandable middle-class prejudice against the whole idea of prostitution and pornography. There are the practical and legal

problems of how to arrange the archive in conformity to the rules and regulations imposed by the university and, more importantly, by the State.

Then there are the moral and ethical dilemmas that I find myself in – which come out of the blue, which can't be prepared for, and are the hardest of all to deal with.

Inquiries about the Archive come from:

- within the university – from academics, administrators, students and library staff;
- academics from other universities;
- the media and concerned citizens who have 'found out about it' and want to know more; and
- various parts of the sex industry – the owners or the workers – who often have very different attitudes and requirements.

I have to tell everyone exactly what the Archive is for and what I'm doing, and that it has the full support of the University Librarian and the Vice-Chancellor.

From the very beginning we have been completely open about it. I had it written up in the *Flinders Journal* (the university magazine) and the *Eros Foundation Journal* (the sex industry equivalent). And I have put a lot of work into the webpage describing it. Even so, I still get a fair amount of criticism which is, I suppose, only to be expected.

There was the initial difficulty in convincing the library and the university that having the archive of Australia's sex industry lobby group would actually be a good idea. *This wasn't easy* - and then, once that was achieved, coming to an arrangement with Eros that was mutually acceptable to both of us.

Then there were the problems of how we would manage the collection once we had it: the procedures, who would do what, and how it would be done. There are ongoing problems of how to develop the Archive and in what areas, so that it becomes more comprehensive and useful to researchers, but keeping it within reasonable bounds – we don't want it to become so big we have to rename the library.

And then there are other problems that the following examples illustrate.

Stories

1. A student comes in, says she wants to do her thesis on pornographic movies. OK. We talk. She explains why she wants to do it. Porn is the ultimate example of male exploitation of women. It's hideous. It's disgusting. It exists solely for the gratification of male lusts. Looking at porn obviously leads to rape. By definition, every rapist is a porn viewer. But she's never actually seen one and would like to see one, right now, tomorrow at the latest.

What to do? We've got this collection courtesy of the sex industry, which makes a big percentage of its money out of porn videos. Should I assist such a project? Where do my allegiances lie? What's more, the woman is very young – in her early 20s – and seems to be quite disturbed.

I try to put her off. Do you really want to spend 12 months studying something you hate? A year later she comes back. She still wants to do a thesis on porn, but has now decided that it represents sexual freedom for women and would like to see examples of the videos made by women directors.

Should this change my attitude to helping her? Should I believe her? She seems to have forgotten (or maybe thinks I've forgotten) our previous conversation. Even if she can get the permission of her supervisor – which is doubtful – do I want someone so troubled by all this to lose it completely because of something I've done?

2. I get a phone call at work. There's a bloke on the line. He's inherited three hundred pornographic videos from an acquaintance who has died recently. Has to get rid of them quickly. Doesn't want his wife to find them. He's got them in the station wagon. He'll be at the back door of the library in ten minutes. I go to meet him. The car is bursting at the seams. Boxes and boxes of hardcore videos with lurid covers are spilling everywhere. I race to get cardboard, blankets, anything, to cover them up and get them inside. Someone will walk past and see them. If they do I'm in serious trouble.

When I get them inside and take a closer look I see that they're all legal, but only just. They're examples of the types of videos that would have been banned if the recommended changes to the X classification had

gone through. If Senator Harradine hadn't blocked the introduction of the toned down non-violent erotica (NVE) category to replace X, most of them would be illegal now.

I ask another librarian to come and help me. He opens the door, takes one look and says: 'Bloody hell, what did this guy die of?' After I've got them all listed and locked away I still don't know what to do. Do we really want them? Do we want so many? They'll skew the collection and show the industry in a bad light. On the other hand, it is what's out there now.

Should I be concerned about the industry's image? After all, I don't work for them. More to the point, what happens when the videos are banned (as they eventually will be)? What will we do with them then? This is what comes from answering telephones.

3. The Archive contains a collection of Australian X-rated videos. It's the only one there is. Most of them have long since disappeared. I get a phone call one day from one of the actors. He's heard about the collection. He and his wife starred in a series in the late 1980s. They were historically important because they changed the way videos were made here, from movies with a storyline and cast to what amounts to home-movies using real couples. Things have happened in their lives, they regret having made them, they just want to forget them. They certainly don't want them archived. Could I please chuck them out if I get any? I admit I already have copies. Could I please destroy them?

I talk to other people in the industry; they think they should be kept. What should I do? As I said, there is no shortage of problems.

4. A woman rings. She's been involved with a man who's made headlines because he tried to sell American secrets in a foreign country. He had a collection of pornographic videos and magazines that he left at her place. The Federal Police and the FBI have both studied them in detail. At the moment they're with the Federal Police. Would I like them when they bring them back? *If* they bring them back. They've already had them *twice*. Honestly, how many times do they need to look at these pictures? She just wants to forget the whole thing and get on with her life. I can have them if I want them; she'll give the Federal Police my address.

But how will I explain it if the police turn up at work? Do they still let you make one phone call from gaol?

These might seem like trivial incidents, but they really happened, and I lost plenty of sleep over them. As you can see, being involved in a collection like this can be moral and ethical nightmare. I have to admit that there've been times when I thought the whole thing's been more trouble than it is worth. As one of my colleagues so memorably put it: Why do we need this filth?

Why do we want such an archive?

This is the big question. The one I have to be able to answer, to myself and everyone else – why do we want such an archive? The Archive was obtained at the specific request of academics in Women's Studies, Sociology, History, Legal Studies, and Screen Studies – primarily Women's Studies. The Professor of Women's Studies at Flinders University at the time (1996) was Lyndall Ryan who was concerned about the quality of the theses that were being done on the sex industry; that they weren't being based on enough primary material.

I contacted Robbie Swan, the Eros parliamentary lobbyist and Fiona Patten, the Eros President, and suggested that perhaps they might like to reclaim some of their living room and deposit their archive at Flinders. We worked out rules and conditions that we thought would satisfy both the industry and the university. They took it to the Eros Board, I went to the University Librarian, and eventually it was agreed upon.

Ten to fifteen years ago a request to house an archive like this in a university library would have been unthinkable. The sex industry, and everything associated with it, was anathema. But a shift took place in the feminist debate in the 1990s. There was a reaction against the feminist Puritanism of 1980s, and there was a more non-judgemental attitude to women working in the sex industry (at every level, from workers through to managers). Research at Flinders was being done in these areas. But the suggestion to get the Eros Archive could never have come from the University Librarian (a male). It had to come from where it did – from the head of Women's Studies.

The Eros Archive contains file after file on censorship, prostitution, homosexuality, and paedophilia, from the mid-1980s on. There are cabinets full of press releases and industry correspondence. There's only a small percentage of pornographic material – examples of the industry's publications and productions. But that's what everyone seems to focus on. The university's worst fear would be to wake up in the morning to headlines like: 'Forget Maths and Physics; do Porn 1, 2, and 3 at Flinders'.

Providing a home for the sex industry archive in a university could be seen as legitimising what many regard as a pretty grubby, only partly legal industry. How to accept such a collection without too many strings attached? This seems to me more of the issue than whether or not it contains pornographic material, but most people don't see it this way.

X-rated videos

One of our biggest headaches was over the inclusion of X-rated videos. It is illegal to rent, sell or screen them publicly in South Australia. Just the idea of us having a collection of them caused consternation to say the least. But from the beginning Lyndall Ryan had felt the video component was important, and had written to the University Librarian explaining why.

Through people in the industry I managed to get hold of most of the films ever made in Australia. These were my personal collection, which I had stacked up at home, until I formally offered them to the university. The University Librarian took the proposal to the Vice-Chancellor, who wisely passed it on to Deputy Vice-Chancellor, a social scientist and a woman (our present Vice-Chancellor, Professor Anne Edwards). In the meantime I contacted all the academics I could find at Flinders and around the country who were doing or had done research in the area, and obtained written support for the idea.

Professor Edwards considered the arguments for and against. She accepted Lyndall Ryan's point that many libraries house sensitive material, eg Aboriginal material, and that this was, in effect, no different. What probably tipped the balance was that there isn't a collection like this anywhere else in Australia. If Flinders didn't want them I was going to send them to ScreenSound Australia or the Australian National

University, both of whom were interested. In the end, she gave her approval provided certain strict conditions were put in place.

In some ways the whole thing was quite amusing. A university that conducts nuclear fusion experiments on one side of the campus, the effects of Ecstasy on the other, was worried about the presence of a collection of pornographic videos you can get over or under the counter at practically any R-rated bookshop in the country, but it was a necessary process to go through.

Why Flinders?

The second part of the question, is: why Flinders? Someone might need to collect this stuff, but why us? Because it's invaluable for *anyone* doing research on the industry, and because academics in Women's Studies at Flinders *are*.

In the past deposit libraries like the National Library and State Libraries haven't gone out of their way to collect pornographic publications or to track down the publishers to make them aware of their legal obligations. (There are cases where material has been refused and the publishers told never to send it again.) Because of this there are very few examples of some of the sex magazines and papers from 1950s to the 1980s in existence. I know of only one substantial collection, in the Wilmar Library, a private library in Adelaide. You might consider this to be a good thing, but it's impossible to write authoritatively about anything unless you have primary material to back it up. Some of the industry's severest critics have complimented us for taking the initiative.

Contents of the collection

The basis of the collection came from the Eros Foundation in Canberra, but I've supplemented it with material from their members, affiliated groups and organisations. I contacted state and national prostitute associations, lesbian and gay organisations, IV drug user groups and publishers, to try to fill in the gaps in the collection.

Of course we don't necessarily want to get *everything* for Eros Archive. It may be more appropriate for things to go to the Lesbian and Gay Archives in Melbourne, for instance, but I encourage groups and individuals to think about depositing what they've collected in a library or archive *somewhere*.

When the gay activist Denis Freney died I got in touch with his partner to make sure that his papers weren't destroyed – they've gone to National Library; the logs from the Gay Counselling Service in Adelaide are eventually going to the Mortlock Library. I advertise other organisations with similar interests through links on my webpage to assist researchers and potential donors.

When the boxes of stuff arrive I do all of the initial sorting, separating it into categories. If there's anything I don't think we ought to have, or which should be embargoed, I get back to the donors.

There are three main categories:

- Catalogued material, which is listed in the Flinders University Library's main catalogue, publicly accessible on and off campus through the Internet. It includes books, official government and industry reports and publications, and some unrestricted publications and videos.
- Uncatalogued material which comprises the bulk of the collection is only listed in Special Collections at Flinders Library. It includes extensive newspaper clippings files and lobbying material; annual reports, industry polls and press releases; and restricted publications and videos.
- Embargoed files contain personal and industry correspondence, files of interviews with sex workers, and some fieldwork journals.

Different expectations

Problems can and do arise from the different expectations of the university, the Eros Foundation, and researchers.

- *The university* insists on firm policies and rules regarding access to and use of archive, which are strictly adhered to. Access to the uncatalogued material requires the approval of the University Librarian and, for some material the approval of the Vice-Chancellor. The uncatalogued section is only available to accredited researchers, and not to undergraduates or the general public. No university money is to be spent on pornographic material.

- *The industry*: Eros needs to be able to retrieve material and have it returned to Canberra now and again (which means, in practice, we have to retain any pre-existing arrangement of files); they also want to be confident that certain sensitive material is definitely embargoed. The adult industry in Australia is a tightly knit group who value their anonymity and privacy. (Names, addresses and telephone numbers remain private.) If prospective donors are at all hesitant, I advise them to err on the side of caution.
- *Researchers* also have their expectations: they don't want any hassles. They want adequate listings of material in the archive; they want the material arranged so that it accurately reflects the listings; and they want clearly stated rules.

Problems

But again there are problems:

Academics

It's sometimes hard to convince academics that the rules and legal requirements apply to them too. That they can't take things home with them. Also academics may not necessarily be as independent as they pretend to be. They can be working for rival companies or interest groups as well as being engaged in academic research, which is why internal industry correspondence is embargoed for twenty years.

Legal obligations

We have legal obligations to protect individuals, staff and students from exposure to explicit material that might offend them. This includes anyone handling, processing, as well as viewing restricted material. We have to warn everyone that they could be confronted with pornographic images. If they are likely to be offended by this they can't work with the collection. Restricted material has to be processed and viewed in a screened-off area.

Security

Security is a major concern. Uncatalogued material and embargoed material has to be securely locked away. Only very limited number of staff have access to the keys.

Preservation of material

Preservation is also a concern. Most of the X-rated videos are getting old and we've got the only copy of some of them left in existence. At present we are in the process of having them duplicated by ScreenSound Australia. When the project's finished we'll have an original copy and a preservation copy and there'll be an archival copy at ScreenSound in Canberra. Not only videos but old faxes also deteriorate - the embargoed files contain lots of them that need to be copied before they become totally unreadable.

Reluctant decisions

Over the years I've had to make some reluctant decisions. To begin with, if there was a reasonable run of restricted magazines, I had them catalogued and listed in our main catalogue. However, after the difficulties with X-rated videos and the obvious nervousness of the university about pornography in general, I decided to remove the records from the catalogue and put the magazines in the uncatalogued collection.

IV drug user magazines were removed from the catalogue for similar reasons - they're only distributed to users and would probably be refused classification if submitted to the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC).

Conclusion

In the end the practical and legal problems are pretty straightforward - you work out the rules and procedures and stick to them. It's the ethical and moral problems that are much more difficult.

One that has bothered me for years is: should a sex industry archive conform to the government policy and public morality of the day, or should it accurately reflect what was available and what was acceptable, at a particular time? As censorship rules change certain material

becomes illegal – should archives be purged to conform to the new standards?

One reason we know about the pornography of previous centuries is because some of it managed to find its way into libraries. Should there be legal exemption for specified libraries and archives? That's unlikely, so probably what will happen is what's always happened. People, for one reason or another, will hide things away for later generations. It's harder to do these days because our collections are open to scrutiny through the Internet in a way they never were before. It only takes a few seconds to check something against the OFLC's database.

My main point is that libraries and archives are not neutral or value free, especially if the archive represents a particular interest group. Do we want certain negative images of sex workers, or brothel owners, or bosses of the sex industry to get out, or should they be suppressed for the good of the cause? Do we want a particular version of the truth to be preserved? A Catholic archive might choose to collect nothing about the recent sex scandals in the Church; of course, the Eros Archive is full of it.

But what happens when the shoe is on the other foot? What will I do then? Do I go along with Eros self-censorship or add incriminating material to the collection? I think of the librarian who worked for the tobacco industry, Phillipa Gafney, and the dilemma she found herself in. In the end you just hope you do the right thing, if and when the time comes, and that you aren't left with too much on your conscience.