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Digital encounters with Pacific Island Radio and television Archives

Richard Moyle

In 2000 the AMPM was awarded some \$86,000 by the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, in a move that was doubly unusual. The Minister had been approached by two businessmen on the Archive's behalf, rather than the Archive submitting any formal application. And the Minister of Finance announced the award in his budget speech for 2000 as a "new Pacific Music Archive", which surprised some of us.

But the money was there.

I spent two and a half years working in Samoa in the 1960s, a further 18 months in Tonga in the 1970s and another three months in the Cook Islands in the 1980s. During those periods I had spent time in local Government radio stations, duplicating my own recordings for broadcast use and also copying selected items from the station archives. I was acutely aware of the precarious circumstances under which archival materials were being stored and used.

Over the following years, I maintained contact with the station managers and Directors of Broadcasting in the three areas, and could confirm that there had been no improvements in storage facilities but also no change in local desire for better curation. It was on that basis that, in 2000, a case was put to the two businessmen - Arthur Baysting, Executive Director of the New Zealand Music Commission, and Terence O'Neill Joyce, Chief executive of the Recording Industry Association of New Zealand. These gentlemen called on the Minister of Education who gained the approval of the Minister of Finance and then moved the money into the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs.

The university solicitor drew up contracts to bring to Auckland a technician from the Tongan Broadcasting Commission, the Samoan Broadcasting Commission, Televisi Samoa (Samoa's Government-funded television station) and the Cook Islands Museum.

Each institution was asked to select a technician who would bring with him/her no more than 100 hours of their most valuable and/or at risk archival holdings. Over the three-week tenure of each visit, these materials would be processed and digitised, providing both hands-on training and a sonically-enhanced product. The funding covered the costs of in-house training, all materials, return airfares and excess baggage, as well as a per diem at Government rates.

First to arrive was the technician from Radio 2AP in Samoa. To our astonishment, he arrived empty-handed, apparently in the belief that he was going to process 100 hours of archival material from our own archive! The carton of tapes finally arrived four days later but in the interim, the technician was able to train using the extensive early Samoan holdings of the archive.

In stark contrast, the Radio Tonga technician arrived with 120 kilos of analogue material, of which some 50 tapes were able to be processed during his three-week visit. These required very little processing as most recordings were remarkably clean.

The Televisé Samoa technician came with a duffle bag full of analogue tapes in SVHS and VHS format and digital tapes in betacam format. This bag-lot represented the sum total of the station's archival holdings which, until then, had been shelved in a non-air-conditioned room adjacent to a non-curtained louvre window facing east.

The Samoan audio tapes dated back to 1986, the Tongan tapes to 1961 and the Televisé Samoa tapes to 1993. The relatively shallow time depth of these archival recordings is indicative of not so much the perils of tropical conditions, but rather a phenomenon well known in Pacific cultures, that of the appropriation of corporate property by executives who claim them as their personal property by dint of their personal heritage and their position of authority.

For Radio 2AP in Samoa, the shallow time depth was also attributable to the station being located

* in a converted weatherboard bungalow

- * on the foreshore
- * only two metres above high tide level, and
- * in a country prone to hurricanes with accompanying storm surges.

Because the archive lacks digital reprocessing video equipment, the overall digitising and copying processes for that part of the project merged into a single, largely mechanical activity inside the university's editing suites. Most of the tapes contained footage of more than one event, and not all events were identified on the tape boxes. In the absence of existing documentation, the technician provided what he could, but the results were very basic. For Samoan speakers, however, the spoken on-camera introductions and commentaries carry sufficient information to allow future databasing of documentation.

The Cook Islands situation was somewhat unusual, in that the Government radio station had been replaced by a commercial organisation, and the archival collection taken from the premises and stored in a succession of locations on Rarotonga, finally residing under the direct supervision of the Secretary to one Government Department.

When sent the contract document, this Secretary countered with one of his own which, had we accepted it, would have required us

- * to make Cook Island law the basis for the entire contract
- * to endorse his claim of personal legal ownership of the tapes,
- * to obtain his personal permission before allowing public access to any copy we might eventually hold in our own archive, and
- * to remit to him the entire contract monies in advance of any action on his part.

Needless to say, the university lawyer rejected all of these elements, and others besides. After some eight months of email exchanges and the involvement of the Cook Islands Crown Law Office, the Secretary finally agreed to the deal, but within a week wrote again to say his own "experts" had advised him not to proceed, and so the whole deal fell through. There was, of course, more to this situation than met the eye.

Technicalities

The technicians were under the direct supervision of the Archive's own technician, Nigel Champion. For the worst quality recordings, denoising was undertaken using a Sonic Solutions editing suite, but most of the processing was possible using ProTools software.

We experienced more challenges, however, with the physical condition of the acetate tapes. While cleaning the tape we invariably found splices resulting from earlier damage, or sometimes the insertion of material from other tapes in order to produce a "compilation tape" for broadcast. Most of the splices were repaired. One tape actually peeled apart and could not be played, but fortunately a duplicate was discovered in the carton. Many tapes had extensive scouring of the oxide coating. Other tapes showed damage from having run off the tape guides during playback or fast spooling, resulting in the removal of a thin line of the oxide coating for many metres. Fortunately, most of these tapes were recorded in full-track mode, and were still playable. Some tapes had longitudinal cuts which required the attachment of a backing tape before they could be played.

After repairs, a magnetic viewer was used to determine the number of tracks, and then playback and copying commenced.

Documentation

It would be fair to describe documentation accompanying the tapes as minimal, listing only the recording date and location, and only sometimes the identification of the performing group. The level of documentation does, however, reflect the operational requirements of the archive's immediate users, namely radio station staff whose cultural knowledge is sufficient to identify the material to the satisfaction of station announcers, and presumably also, station listeners.

Further funding from the Ministry has been clouded somewhat with a change in Minister, and we now have to contend with a man who is also our Foreign Minister. However, I'm a voter in his electorate, so perhaps I can make a twofold approach...

Outcomes

Being a Government institution dedicated to the wellbeing and advancement of Pacific Island peoples in New Zealand, the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs was particularly interested in the digitisation project's practical outcomes and benefits for Samoans and Tongans (and Cook Islanders) resident in New Zealand. The Ministry was also keen to see evidence of self-reliance and useful training for similar people in the respective homelands.

The project was able to provide these kinds of outcomes in various ways.

* On a micro-level,

While waiting for his carton of tapes to arrive, the Samoan technician discovered that we held a copy of the drumming sequence which constituted the station call-sign, whereas the station's own recording had been lost for several years. That call-sign has now been reinstated.

* Directors of Broadcasting of both Samoa and Tonga sent me unsolicited letters of warm appreciation, which were duly forwarded to the Ministry.

* The Samoan technician was so enthusiastic about the usefulness of his training while in Auckland that the Director of Broadcasting decided to ask our archive technician to come to Samoa for a month and train the entire technical staff. Two years on, the funding has yet to materialise in Samoa, but the level of interest remains high and I am confident that the training will eventually happen.

But there's more, as they say. Earlier this year the archive was awarded funding for what amounts to an extension of the digitisation programme, with the arrival in Auckland in September of the Cultural Officer in the Western Province Division of Culture, Environment, Aviation and Tourism in Solomon Islands along with 140 of the 800 cassettes he made over a 15-year period as part of his official duties. During his three weeks at the archive, he received training in digitising and progressed to the point where he could separate tracks, delete extraneous material at the start and end of tracks, and organise material into CD-sized batches ready for burning. His documentation was very thorough and included signed permission forms from performers for all his material. He is keen to return to Auckland and complete the job, and I am sounding out possible funding sources for him.

The bigger picture

Ours was not the first digital initiative within the Pacific region. In 2002 the Unesco Office of the Pacific States commissioned a survey of libraries and archives among its member nations, as part of Unesco's larger Pacific Pathways project. Perhaps predictably, the survey revealed ongoing deterioration in both the physical infrastructure as well as in Government commitment and financial support. The survey did, however, reveal support for the concept of what it calls telecentres: existing institutions which would broaden their services, and act as a conduit for information from multiple Government bodies.

Once digitised, the creation and storage of duplicate audio archives is relatively simple, but if storage occurs in the same location, perhaps even the same country, then the problems of deteriorating infrastructure are distinctly relevant.

There is also something of an irony here. We are changing the medium of the audio materials in order to make them more durable. But at the same time, we are substituting a medium which is more prone to theft by dint of its size and the universal availability of private replay facilities. The Samoan technician remarked several times that he feared extensive theft of CD copies of his station's archival recordings. Parallel to these concerns are the all-too-familiar problems of long-term storage of digital media in a tropical environment where reliability or even continuity of electricity and air-conditioning can't be guaranteed.

New Zealand has longstanding political, historical and cultural associations with its South Pacific nation neighbours. Long-term, the Archive has no colonising ambitions within the Pacific, but we are advocating the creation of an off-site security copy of digitised material, and in that regard we are offering our services for the long-term curation of such a copy, under appropriate contractual arrangements, in a logical expansion of the telecentre principle.

It is possible but expensive now, and will presumably become more economic in the future, for replacement copies of lost or damaged digitised items to be sent electronically to radio stations (or to private individuals, for that matter). In that way, we foresee the archive's

Pacific role in the future as the hub of a conservation and distribution network of island radio and television stations. Radio Samoa and Radio Tonga have already accepted the principle and have also put their recordings where their principles are by allowing the security copy to be housed in the archive. Radio Samoa has gone one stage further by requesting the archive to curate its original analogue materials on a long term basis.

We ourselves have taken the position that we would prefer -- but do not insist upon as an absolute requirement -- that non-restricted material included in such collections be made available for educational purposes within the university.

I believe that an archive like our own can play a regional role within the South Pacific. We almost have the means of becoming a kind of regional repository for offsite security copies of digitised material currently housed in radio and television stations, government departments and museums, as well as private collections. Through appropriately protected internet access to the archive's holdings, for example, a subscriber could download, whenever necessary, duplicate copies of its own archival material in cases of loss or damage to an existing copy. And by a parallel process, stations could update their own level of protection by periodically uploading to the archive. At present, a compressed format would be a necessity, but most of our own material intended for general use achieves a satisfactory quality in MP3 format.

I said that we "almost" have the means because we lack one ingredient, that of finance. Next year, we hope to take a case to Government for central funding of an institution which now serves a community far greater than the academics among whom it is physically located. Indeed, for several years now, the archive has achieved one of its founding intentions - to be a national institution.

But that next step will depend on marrying the various demands of cultural relevance, technical capacity and political agendas.