

## Preserving Regional Television History: The NBN Television Archive Project

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### **Introduction**

This paper details a decade-long collaborative project between the University of Newcastle (Australia) Library and NBN Television to digitise the ‘Channel 3’ television archive, the first regional commercial TV station in New South Wales, established in Newcastle in 1962. The project is community and industry led by former television staff. The project aims to safeguard the cultural legacy of the Hunter region by digitising its at-risk audiovisual materials and related paper records, ensuring their accessibility for future generations. This paper also briefly introduces the [‘NBN Television Archive’](#) Linius Whizzard video content discovery platform and playlist solution created through a partnership between the University Library and IT Services.

**KEYWORDS:** - GLAM sector, analogue, University Archives, audio-visual archive, television archive

### **Background: A Collaborative Initiative**

This project, dedicated to digitising the NBN Television archive, is a community and industry-driven initiative that commenced in 2011 at NBN Television's Mosbri Crescent studios as shown in news story [‘History Digitising’](#). The initial focus was on the station's magnetic tape collection, utilising available playback equipment.

A significant development occurred in 2018 when the digitisation project relocated to the University of Newcastle's GLAM<sup>X</sup> Lab. This move provided a dedicated space and essential resources for the ongoing work. Located in the Auchmuty Library, the GLAM<sup>X</sup> Lab was established in 2017 and inspired by University Archivist Gionni di Gravio. It serves as a vital

training facility for Work Integrated Learning (WIL) students across all University of Newcastle faculties, meeting the rising demand for GLAM sector professionals. (Di Gravio et al 2018, Di Gravio et al 2017)

Equipped to handle a comprehensive range of audio-visual formats, the [GLAM<sup>X</sup> Lab](#) prioritises the urgent digitisation of film archives, with magnetic tapes identified as the most vulnerable media according to the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA). Despite the absence of dedicated funding, the preservation of these 'at-risk' materials is primarily undertaken by dedicated volunteers and students.

The core of the digitisation effort is a team of former television employees who regularly volunteer their time and expertise to meticulously digitise film reels, tapes, and related paper documents. Complementing their work, students have also been actively involved, viewing footage to identify key content and create summaries.

### **Purpose and objectives**

The overarching aim of the NBN Television Archive Project remains to complete digitisation of all audiovisual content within the NBN Television archive, ensuring its preservation and accessibility for current and future generations.

The NBN Television archive encompasses a rich array of materials:

- *Audiovisual Content*: Primarily magnetic tape (dating from 1982-2018, prioritized due to its fragile nature) and 16mm film formats (1962-1982).
- *Paper Records*: Including cue sheets, index cards, scripts, and various memorabilia.

## Methodology

The project's strategic approach involved prioritising "at-risk" formats recognizing the urgency of preserving deteriorating media, the digitisation of magnetic tapes was prioritized in alignment with the National Film and Sound Archive's (NFSA) '[Deadline 2025](#)'.

Key methodological aspects guiding the project include:

- *Incremental Digitisation:* Magnetic tapes were digitised in ten-year increments facilitating organized workflows and enabling content availability for significant anniversaries. Content by decade to readily support significant commemorations and anniversaries with relevant footage for instance, in 2018, footage from 1979 was digitised and prepared in anticipation of the 40th anniversary of [The Star Hotel Riot](#) in September 2019.
- *Knowledge Preservation:* A cornerstone of the project is the active involvement of former NBN Television staff. Their invaluable expertise regarding the equipment, archive creation processes, and the historical context of the content is crucial for accurate Digitisation and metadata creation.
- *Metadata Capture:* Detailed descriptions and metadata are meticulously captured alongside the Digitisation process. This information supplements or, where necessary, replaces missing original cue sheets and documentation, enhancing the discoverability and understanding of the archived materials.
- *Organic Growth and Adaptation:* The project has evolved dynamically over the past decade, adapting its methodology and workflows based on the available physical, digital, and human resources. This flexibility has been essential in overcoming unforeseen challenges.

With a focus on preserving the most vulnerable formats, Umatic, Betacam, DVcam and VHS tapes, by 2022 the Lab had successfully digitised 36 years of stories that included 5000 video tapes an approximate total of 2750 hours of local news. This was completed to coincide with the station's 60th anniversary deadline in 2022. (HLH Aug 2021)

## **Project Impact: A Legacy for the Future**

The NBN Television Archive Project has a profound impact on:

- *Preserving Regional Heritage:* Safeguarding the region's audio film history for future generations, documenting significant events like natural disasters, industrial changes, emergency responses, and community anniversaries and celebrations.
- *Community Engagement and Education:* Providing accessible historical materials for research, education, and creative projects, fostering collaborations with universities, filmmakers, and local organisations.
- *Additional Engagement:* The archive is accessible online via the [UONCC YouTube](#) channel and has been used for research, local community events, and documentaries, including the ['Stories of Our Town'](#) history series. Each week, the ['NBN News Rewind'](#) segment features digitised footage, which is also available for online viewing.

For over six decades, the local television station NBN has meticulously documented the life and times of Newcastle and the Hunter region. This invaluable visual record began on film for its first twenty years, transitioning to videotape thereafter. Over the past eight years, a dedicated team of retired television professionals volunteering at the University of Newcastle has undertaken the significant task of digitising the videotape news stories and a substantial portion of the early news film.

The project leverages the invaluable practice-based experience of former television staff who worked during the industry's analogue era. Having already digitised the 'at risk' magnetic tape news content from 1982 to 2018, the team is now focusing on digitising the 16mm film formats. As of May 2025, 512 reels (totalling 256 hours, with each reel averaging 30 minutes) have been digitised. This leaves 2207 reels remaining. Beyond the audiovisual materials, the archive also includes paper records such as cue sheets, index cards, scripts, and memorabilia.

However, this crucial preservation effort is now critically threatened. The digitising equipment currently in use, painstakingly assembled by these volunteers over nine years ago from second-hand parts, is increasingly unreliable. They face a daunting challenge in completing the digitisation of over 1100 hours of irreplaceable filmed news stories from the 1970s and early 1980s – a visual chronicle of the people, places, and pivotal events that shaped Newcastle and the Hunter.

Adding to the urgency, many of the original scripts containing vital story information for this film era are lost. The contextual knowledge – the who, what, when, and where of these historical moments – resides solely in the memories of the generation who lived through them. Unless this information is captured now, through the painstaking process of past news camera operators, editors, and journalists viewing the digitised footage and providing their recollections, information about the footage will be lost forever with the passing of this generation. Digitisation is the essential first step in unlocking these memories.

### **Key Contributors**

The success of this project is attributable to the dedicated efforts of numerous individuals and organizations:

- *Phillip Lloyd*: Adjunct Lecturer and former NBN Television producer who has provided invaluable leadership and extensive knowledge throughout the project.
- *Volunteers*: Including former television industry professionals and university students who contribute their time and expertise to the demanding Digitisation tasks. The dedication of the volunteers preserving our history is a profound gift to future generations, a gift whose value will only appreciate with time. Since 2011 there have been 20+ volunteers, and 10+ students involved in the project.

- *University of Newcastle Library and GLAM<sup>X</sup> Lab*: Provided project management support and facilitated access to university technical and infrastructure resources.
- *NBN Television and City of Newcastle Library*: Have generously provided technical assistance, including the repair of essential equipment. The Newcastle Library housed the television film archive.

Other contributors have included university work integrated students at the GLAM<sup>X</sup> Lab who have worked directly with the television archive, one project by [CMNS2035 media production](#) students created precises on news stories, another project '[Regional World 50 Years Ago](#)' provided students with practical skills and experience in the process of creating (or reassembling) single audio-visual content, exemplified by the reconstruction of news items from multiple files. Furthermore, volunteers contribute their time and specialist knowledge to produce archival recordings with individuals who have worked in the television industry, an example being the '[Behind the Tube](#)' podcasts created by historian Andrew Mercado in collaboration with the university Special Collections.

### **Project Management and Funding**

The NBN Television Archive Project has been sustained through significant in-kind support from NBN Television (from 2011 to 2017) and the University of Newcastle (from 2018 to the present). The project's driving force is the dedication of a team of volunteers, many of whom are retired professionals from the television industry, bringing a wealth of experience and commitment. Project management involves the coordination of these volunteers, effective liaison with university IT services, and the meticulous maintenance of project records. There is no financial contribution except for donations made by community groups and individuals, often made via the [Vera Deacon Regional History Fund](#).

## **Critical Need for Reliable Equipment**

Although part of the archive has been digitised the need for financial investment continues to preserve this unique and invaluable historical record of the Newcastle and Hunter regions.

New and reliable digitising equipment is urgently required to ensure the continuation and completion of this vital project. Without it, the window of opportunity to capture the invaluable knowledge held by this generation will close irrevocably. Currently with the support of Rotary Club of Newcastle Enterprise, a grant application has been submitted to purchase a new digitiser.

### *The Profound Loss of Inaction*

Failure to fund and digitise this project will likely result in the stalling and eventual loss of irreplaceable historical footage – a significant detriment to the community. The knowledge and memories embedded within these news stories are unique and cannot be recreated. By neglecting to preserve this history, we risk severing a vital link to the past and losing the opportunity to learn from the experiences of those who came before us.

Furthermore, the loss of this historic footage would severely impact the region's cultural identity and heritage. These news stories are the narratives of the people who built Newcastle and the Hunter, documenting their triumphs, struggles, joys, sorrows, and the everyday events that forged the community spirit. Preserving these stories ensures that the rich history and heritage of the region are passed down to future generations, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity.

## **Benefit of digitisation**

A fully digitised archive will serve as an indispensable resource for:

- *Historians and Researchers*: Providing primary source material for understanding the region's social, cultural, economic, and political evolution.

- *Educators and Students:* Offering a tangible connection to the past, enriching learning experiences and fostering local historical awareness.
- *The General Public:* Providing a window into their heritage, fostering a sense of place, community identity, and shared history.

### *Benefit to communities*

The preservation of this archive offers significant benefits to the wider community including the dedicated volunteers, who form a unique and valuable community service as well as community of practice in which they are willing to share with others. (HLH Sept 2022)

- *Preserving Hunter Regional History:* Creating a unique audio-visual archive documenting life in the Hunter region, capturing significant events, local stories, and cultural moments, and providing crucial historical and cultural context for future generations.
- *Community Engagement and Nostalgia:* Rekindling memories and shared experiences that strengthen community bonds through accessible programs, serving as a valuable resource for students, researchers, historians, and filmmakers, supporting local initiatives like "Stories of Town" that the University Library has partnered with to produce documentaries. The [‘Rewind: A Hunter Region NBN Television Retrospective Exhibition,’](#) hosted by the University Library, fostered a gathering of former television industry staff, students, and community members who came together to contribute to and celebrate the NBN Television archive, with the event documented through a virtual scan.(HLH July 2024) The archive, made accessible through this project, also serves as a valuable resource for contemporary television professionals, enabling them to tell industry stories, for example, the celebration of 70 years of colour television. (HLH March 2025)
- *Sense of Purpose and Impact:* Volunteers derive immense satisfaction from their crucial role in safeguarding the region's history. Digitisation allows them to directly contribute by

reviewing materials and adding invaluable context and descriptions, enhancing accessibility and understanding. Their dedication has already ensured the survival of valuable historical materials, providing a meaningful way to give back to the community and boost well-being through social connections and a shared sense of purpose.

- *Skill Development and Networking*: The project offers opportunities for students and community volunteers to gain valuable skills in archival work, digital preservation, and metadata creation, fostering camaraderie and collaboration within the team and the wider community.

### **Technological Innovation**

A significant technological advancement implemented by the project is the integration of the Linus "Whizzard" video content discovery and playlist solution. (Hardy 2024) Developed through a partnership between the University Library and IT Services, this innovative tool allows users to efficiently search, identify key content segments, and create custom playlists from the digitised news archive spanning 1982 to 1995. This tool unlocks previously difficult-to-access news content, allowing users to search videos, pinpoint key moments, and build custom playlists. This pilot project provides unprecedented access to the Hunter region's social and cultural history, empowering users to curate content for research or personal exploration. The implementation of the 'Whizzard' tool significantly enhances the accessibility and usability of the digitised news content for researchers, students, and the wider community.

### **Challenges**

The project has encountered and continues to navigate various challenges, including the availability of resources (both human resourcing and financial), the maintenance and repair of

aging equipment, and the complex task of comprehensive metadata capture, particularly for materials with incomplete original documentation. The reliance on the memories of long-retired television staff for contextual information, especially for the early film years where scripts and file cards are missing, presents a unique and time-sensitive challenge. Ensuring the continuity of volunteer support and securing the necessary equipment for the remaining film digitisation are also ongoing considerations. Managing the digital storage and ensuring reliable, high-speed transfer of the ever-increasing volume of captured film to university servers is a continuous challenge. We are constantly monitoring our digital storage capacity due to the large file sizes.

### **Key Learnings**

The establishment of the audio-visual Digitisation Lab revealed several critical insights. Firstly, the timeline for achieving full operational capacity across diverse formats was significantly underestimated, requiring three years. Secondly, the inherent complexity of handling a wide array of audio-visual media presented substantial technical challenges, particularly in sourcing compatible legacy equipment and spare parts. The project's reliance on the unique expertise of former NBN employee Phillip Lloyd, whose deep understanding of older technologies is indispensable, became evident. A significant obstacle was the University's procurement policies, which hindered the acquisition of necessary second-hand parts, placing a financial burden on volunteers. This highlights the critical need for specialist knowledge and funding in meeting the NFSA's 2025 deadline.

Furthermore, the project underscored the considerable time and effort required for effective project management of multifaceted digitisation initiatives. The intricate workflows, encompassing accessioning, conservation, digitisation, metadata creation, and distribution, demanded a greater level of coordination than initially anticipated. Consequently, the

coordinator's role evolved to encompass both daily lab management and comprehensive project oversight.

### **Future Directions**

This community industry led project has achieved substantial progress in digitising the NBN Television archive, providing unprecedented access to the rich social and cultural history of the Hunter region. Future efforts will primarily focus on the completion of the digitisation of the remaining 16mm film collection. As mentioned, this phase may necessitate the acquisition of new, user-friendly film digitisers as the pool of experts in analog technology continues to diminish. Ensuring the long-term preservation and accessibility of this unique regional television history remains the paramount goal. Recognizing the project's fragility due to the aging equipment, the team remains vigilant for opportunities to acquire spare projectors. In May 2025, a second-hand machine was purchased by volunteers from an online marketplace as a backup.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the enduring success of this project rests on the shoulders of individuals who recognize the archive's profound importance and are passionately committed to its completion. As Lab Coordinator, I am constantly impressed by the camaraderie, dedication, and respect displayed by our team members each week. They are more than just volunteers; they are experienced industry leaders offering invaluable expertise. We are truly fortunate to have such a driven and collaborative team.

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