

Seeing, Hearing, and Moving Heritage

Issues and Implications for the World's Audiovisual Memory in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Recorded sound and moving images have captured some of the most influential human achievements, daily events, and tragedies of our world. Although advocates for universal access to global heritage receive public accolades, the audiovisual archives community, in charge of millions of artefacts in need of reformatting for simple playback, remains acutely aware of key questions: Who will pay for such access, and how can we ensure long-term support for such projects and long term preservation? This paper will provide an overview of the current challenges faced by the world's audiovisual archives, in particular that of raising public awareness, as well as announce a new global initiative encouraging cooperation and collaboration for the sake of audiovisual digitization and preservation.

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1. Introduction

Since the inception of moving image and recorded sound technologies in the late nineteenth century, audiovisual materials have assumed a central role in human culture around the world. Our primary understanding of global events is more comprehensible and enriched via moving images and sound. An inspiring, eclectic range of audiovisual collections – from Hindi language feature films that appeal to global audiences, audio recordings of languages now gone, to filmed and recorded testimonies of genocide survivors – often share a similar fate: decomposition, destruction and disappearance from our world's collective memory.

In the United States alone, over 50% of Hollywood-produced moving images created before 1950 no longer exist.¹ While shocking, that particular Library of Congress-produced statistic only references Los Angeles corporate-produced product. When scholars and archivists team up to look more seriously at the breadth of American “movies,” from industrial and educational films, documentaries, home videos, etc..., statistics reveal even more significant losses that are virtually incalculable. At the World Electronic Media Forum, which took place in Tunis in late 2005, UNESCO noted that approximately 80% of the 200 million hours of footage known to be in the world’s television archives will likely disappear by 2015.² Data compiled by the United States of America’s Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) indicate that in that country’s public institutions, nearly 17,000 organizations held sound recordings “at risk,” nearly 50% of which remained in “unknown condition.”³ These are statistics that reflect merely the material thus known in archives; the vast majority of the world’s audiovisual material remains uncollected and far outside conventional repositories or professional expertise. **For audiovisual preservation, the clock is ticking.**⁴

2. Digitization and Preservation Obstacles:

A number of important factors contribute to the uniquely vulnerable state of both analogue and digital audiovisual material. Two other papers presented at “The Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation Conference” will be looking more closely at the specific technical challenges to sustaining film, television and digital A.V. files. My goal here is to introduce very broadly the variety of topics affecting the preservation of audiovisual materials as well as to highlight one too often forgotten obstacle: the need to increase public awareness and support for preservation efforts.

The ever-quickening obsolescence of playback equipment threatens decades-worth of historical, aesthetic and cultural heritage in communities in the developing world as well as the most affluent European cities. The disappearance of even the most seemingly ubiquitous playback equipment alongside the cessation of parts manufacturing, combine to threaten the current preservation efforts of archivists, particularly with electronic analogue formats. Without the ability to play back electronic media, there can be no digitization, no preservation and no access; millions of hours of televised and filmed events and activities from every corner of our world will be lost forever.

In September of 2012, the Fuji Corporation announced that it would cease production of nearly all of its motion picture film, a medium still considered by the global film preservation community to be the ideal long-term preservation solution for the moving image. Although percentages vary depending on the source, Fuji provides between 20% and 40% of the world’s motion picture stock, Eastman Kodak’s promise to step in to supply even more than the film they currently manufacture seems shaky at best with the company’s own bankruptcy filing this same year. Many filmmakers and media executives, however, watch without concern as celluloid, a beautiful but stubbornly 19th century technology slowly fades away during the 21st century, because of the omnipresence and seeming ease of digital capabilities.

¹ “Film Preservation 1993: A Study of the Current State of American Film Preservation: Report of the Librarian of Congress,” (Washington, D.C. : National Film Preservation Board of the Library of Congress), 1993, p. 3. <http://www.loc.gov/film/study.html>

² Malden, Sue. Archives@Risk presentation, Georgetown University, August 2007.

³ The State of Recorded Sound Preservation in the United States: A National Legacy at Risk in the Digital Age, National Recording Preservation Board of the Library of Congress, The Council on Library and Information Sciences and the Library of Congress August 2010. (10). <http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/nrpb/pub148.pdf>

⁴ UNESCO World Day for Audiovisual Heritage 2012 theme

Unfortunately, those who glibly advocate for a quick and easy “digital transition” for moving images would heed well the warnings detailed in a 2008 joint report on digital preservation between repositories and research organizations in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and the



Images of women in Thailand working to clean obsolete video formats

Netherlands: “Embodying creative works in digital form has the unfortunate effect of potentially decreasing their useable lifespan. Digital information is ephemeral: it is easily deleted, written over or corrupted. Digitized and born digital materials are an important part of the world’s cultural heritage, but unless active steps are taken to preserve them, they will be lost.”⁵ The persistent lack of a concrete preservation standard for digital audiovisual material, particularly moving images, presents only one of the many factors related to the reality of digital technology’s ephemeral nature.

Technology, in its most basic sense, remains a central, and certainly the most easily understood challenge for both corporate and non-profit custodians of the world’s audiovisual heritage. But it is critical to note that such technological obstacles merely serve as the first of even more pressing constraints. Regardless of the technology at the core of a project (e.g., a 35mm Steenbeck, a Umatic video deck, or a DVD player from the 1990s), the strains on human labour, both financial and emotional, required for digitization and preservation associated with such tedious work likely remain the most pressing, most expensive (and definitely most difficult to fund) cost. Workers in the smallest of entrepreneurial audiovisual libraries and archives to technicians in massive digital asset management companies share the strain of repetitive, detailed and physically draining work. Many audiovisual artefacts require “real time” transfers, which can be additionally problematic to workflow, financial costs, and simple staff or personnel morale.

The economic impact of digitizing and hosting access portals of audiovisual becomes increasingly complicated as most archives and archivists are unable to digitize in-house and must work with boutique, expensive vendors. When governments do prioritize the digitization of audiovisual material, little

⁵ International Study on the Impact of Copyright Law on Digital Preservation” A joint report of the Library of Congress National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program (US), the Joint Information Systems Committee (UK), the Open Access to Knowledge Law Project (AU), the SURF foundation (NL), July 2008.

attention is given to the sustainability (aka, long term preservation) of such projects. Legal constraints of corporate-produced material (specifically copyright protected music and film) prevent adequate access to preserved and already digitized media in major non-profit or government repositories. Perhaps even more significantly, audiovisual artefacts that were registered for copyright by specific owners who can no longer be found or contacted, remain “orphaned” and virtually unusable in repositories and community collections all over the world.

In essence, the challenges facing the global audiovisual preservation community closely reflect, even mirror, the challenges laid out for attendees and participants by the convenors of the “Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation Conference.” It is critical to highlight a particularly important aspect underlying this long list of obstacles, and, frankly, one too often ignored by archival practitioners: The need to increase awareness of the problem itself to the world’s constituencies who make and consume audiovisual material at an accelerating rate, thanks to increasingly affordable media-making technologies. Outside of rarefied practitioner circles, challenges to the preservation of film, broadcasting or recorded sound collections (much less the stark statistics of the significant global losses already) are met with confusion, not concern.

Arguments for the preservation of ubiquitous, contemporary and seemingly “glamorous” audiovisual media provides a stark contrast to expressing passion for preserving Lebanon’s Phoenician Alphabet, the seventeenth century baptism records of slaves from the Dominican Republic, or medieval tapestries of Europe.⁶ How, people might wonder, does *The Wizard of Oz*, produced in 1939 by MGM Studios in Hollywood, CA and seen the world over in multiple variations, digital, celluloid or otherwise, merit preservation attention or, indeed, its inclusion on UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register?⁷ The answer is both complicated and simple at the same time: Although a corporate product currently protected by a corporate owner, *The Wizard of Oz* remains a beloved piece of cultural heritage in many parts of the world. Moreover, such a famous movie can be a unique “hook” to engaging a public familiar with such feature film “classics” with more esoteric, historical and fascinating audiovisual records.

When offered a public platform to discuss their avocation, audiovisual preservation professionals understandably turn first to the technical challenges of audiovisual preservation versus that of text preservation. Although the long term conservation of paper in the right archival conditions is well documented, the long term preservation of analogue and digital video is wholly unproven and offers an enormous challenge with over hundreds of thousands of hours of material captured on enormous files. What is often lost in this practitioner tendency to focus on the technical challenges, however, is the opportunity to engage the broader public, funding agencies and the media industries themselves by a focus upon the access of vulnerable content, regardless of original medium, to explain more clearly the artefact’s value itself. In essence, to challenge the global AV preservation community to say “it’s ok” to prioritize some access first in order to drive preservation – a direct flip to decades old professional mantras.

One key “archive at risk” is currently based in a former medical school morgue: the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala’s Film Library, the Cinemateca Universitaria Enrique Torres (Cinemateca). At the Cinemateca, a few part time staff works to protect over 5,000 reels of film on a variety of formats – from 35mm nitrate to 8mm home movies. Founded by a member of faculty in the late 1960s or early 70s, the Cinemateca’s current aims reflect its earliest iteration as a cine-club – showcasing rare and even

⁶ All of these artefacts are currently on the Memory of the World register.

⁷ Nominated by George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, New York (USA), *The Wizard of Oz* was entered into the Memory of the World Register in 2007.

banned films amid political turbulence. With a contemporary mission to share and to protect the country's film material and to support the growth of the nation's film production, the Cinemateca battles economic adversity as well as its climate.



Images of rotting films in Guatemala's Cinemateca Universitaria Enrique Torres

The Cinemateca staff, when interviewed, voiced an important dissenting voice to current heritage preservation practice, arguing that they believed it vital to digitize much of their material, even with the knowledge that the digital format might be less ideal over the long term. Some kind of digitization, they felt, could drive more interest in raising funds towards longer-term preservation efforts.⁸

In the second decade of the 21st century, it is time to try out some new approaches to raising awareness about what so many do not even understand as a problem. The CCAAA is today launching a program intended to serve as a catalyst for action, a high profile Public Relations campaign for audiovisual associations around the world: Archives@Risk.

3. A Concrete Step Forward: Archives @ Risk

Officially formed in 2000, the Co-ordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (CAAAA) represents the interests of an array of organizations focused upon preserving materials such as broadcast television and radio, film, and audio recordings. Members include the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), the International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT), the Southeast Asia-

⁸ For more information regarding the Cinemateca's challenges and approach, see Caroline Frick's *Saving Cinem*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA), the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA), the Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC), the Federation of Commercial Audiovisual Archives (FOCAL) as well as the audiovisual interest sector of the International Council on Archives (ICA) and the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). CCAAA members include professionals working in for-profit and non-profit organizations, higher education, government agencies and branches as well as devoted individuals and hobbyists. CCAAA provides a communication forum as well as a platform for joint initiatives in this specialized area of heritage preservation.

The official discourse underlying the value and rationale for the creation of CCAAA accurately denotes that “the preservation of the audiovisual heritage concerns those who produce, those who preserve and disseminate as well as those who use audiovisual documents.”⁹ The CCAAA membership, embracing the world’s most populous and arguably most active A.V. preservation associations clearly substantiate this claim. Where CCAAA has struggled most in its twelve years of existence is encapsulated in a core component of its goals for action: the need to co-operate amongst these associations which represent a diverse organizational membership to offer a united program of action and priorities. In addition, with virtually every representative to CCAAA a volunteer for their own A.V. preservation organization in an era of institutional cutbacks, time is at a premium.

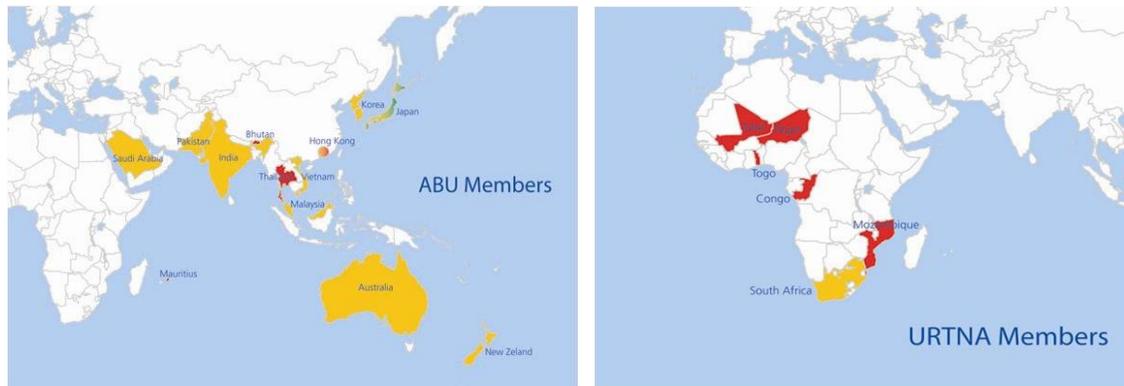
Understanding CCAAA’s difficult work over the last several years must be seen within the context of an often under-discussed aspect to archival work which can complicate the repeated request by funders and government agencies to collaborate: tensions and underlying competition within the preservation community itself. Archivists, librarians and museologists from any part of the world can be (and in many cases *should be* so as to protect the collections under their care) very proprietary in nature. Professional wariness over collaborative projects that are often added to daily administrative duties, even more of an acute concern in an era of limited resources where an understaffed labour force is doing more with less, can, in the worst case scenario, result in problematic and often failed joint ventures. Collaborative efforts struggle to maintain projects or cultivate sustainable support from government agencies, foundations or other types of funding bodies.

With a profound and sober understanding of such challenges, CCAAA’s annual meeting in 2012 garnered renewed support for a specific, concrete initiative that could establish preliminary steps with obtainable, escalating outcomes in the area of preserving and digitizing moving image and sound heritage collections. CCAAA offers a partnership prototype amongst various stakeholders whose shared passion and efforts can create substantive change. Thus, on behalf of CCAAA, I am pleased to announce our “Archives@Risk” program.

Archives@Risk aspires to unite a wide range of collections, archives and professionals and, in doing so, offers concrete models to challenge standard protocols of archival practice and action. CCAAA, as an “umbrella” organization between audiovisual associations, will showcase current projects from the global membership as well as launch new initiatives. Archives@Risk will bring together a variety of countries, archives, collections, and industries that might find it challenging to collaborate via traditional inter-government programs. For example, one of the key obstacles in digitization and preservation for endangered audiovisual heritage in all regions of the world is that so much valuable material remains outside of established archives, museums or libraries. Archives@Risk provides an opportunity for professional exchange in a more informal mode.

⁹ Co-ordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations, <http://ccaaa.org/what.html>, accessed September 1, 2012.

The first iteration of the Archives@Risk program was an outgrowth of exchange at the World Electronic Media Forum that took place in Tunis during late 2005. At the Forum, an ad-hoc group, including representatives from the United Nations, UNESCO, the World Broadcasting Union (WBU), the European Broadcasting Union, and the International Federation of Television Archives, formed and conducted a global survey on endangered A.V. archives and collections predicated on the WBU and their regional membership. The results, while not wholly inclusive, provide concrete data about the enormous problem at hand, and of the most endangered regions, particularly material held in West Africa and Southeast Asia.¹⁰



Maps representing the most critical areas of the world for digitization and preservation of audiovisual materials according to a 2007 World Broadcasting Union survey

The initial objectives of the Archives@Risk project were ambitious. Leading organizations had been brought together to articulate more clearly both the breadth of the challenges facing the global audiovisual heritage as well as to identify key areas of vulnerability. In addition, the program aspired to create an online library of audiovisual preservation resources; to provide access to highlighted moving image and sound clips to illustrate the value of such material; and, perhaps most importantly, to save particularly endangered collections. The initial work accomplished on the project indicated great need and interest and resulted in a rich website with clips and resources. Quick action was taken to rescue two collections “at risk” in Madagascar and Vietnam. However, the original group charged with the project realized that to achieve more substantive impact, and in order to be more fully inclusive, more partners in the project were needed. Thus, the International Federation of Television Archives brought Archives@Risk to the CCAAA who now will spearhead project development and strategy.

In light of the goals for “The Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation Conference,” Archives@Risk merits attention as a model for cooperative action across industry and academia; government and non-government organizations; professionals and amateurs. Lessons learned from the initial work on the project indicate that for more substantive long-term success, Archives@Risk will need to function on a two tier level: First, the program acts as a united front for the world’s largest A.V. archive professionals to raise public awareness of the preservation challenges in the digital age as well as reinforce the value of individual collections, A.V. repositories and those that work in

¹⁰ Malden, Sue. Archives@Risk presentation, Georgetown University, August 2007.

them. Second, Archives@Risk strives to obtain funding and to create the infrastructure for expertise, exchange and cooperation between different organizations and individuals predicated on specific A.V. digitization and preservation needs. For example, Archives@Risk will be developing further its “Archive Buddy” program that successfully partnered broadcasting giant NHK in Japan to come to the aid of a decomposing video collection in Vietnam.

CCAAA believes that the digital archives and preservation community must not forget that a critical part of the work we need to do is to continue to explain to the global public why film, television, recorded sound and borne digital versions of all such A.V. materials are critically important to our memory of the world and, as such, must be preserved. Archives@Risk provides the inter-association organization with a powerful public tool with which to do just that.

4. Conclusion

Audiovisual material occupies an important place in UNESCO’s Memory of the World program. Currently, the MOW Register contains over fifty film and videos, from Cuba and Chile to Lithuania, the Philippines and Luxembourg, representing the eclectic nature of audiovisual heritage. Audiovisual material is more than just “the movies” or “music” in the same way that challenges to its preservation and digitization are far more than purely technological in nature.

One particularly important “non-technical” challenge shared by all involved in the preservation and digitization of A.V. archives whether a small, entrepreneurial collector or a large government funded repository, is the necessity to increase awareness and to cultivate a true sense of urgency to the plight of moving image and sound cultural heritage. We need to balance more pragmatically the needs of preservation and access, particularly in light of the critical dearth of public awareness of preservation challenges. CCAAA’s Archives@Risk program will champion broader access to materials to convey the urgency of long term digitization and preservation requirements.

In a sense, A.V. archives need to learn what UNESCO has succeeded at so beautifully with its Memory of the World program: to excite the public by a broad, universally appealing awareness campaign with which to inspire and engage both today’s as well as future generations. With Archives@Risk, CCAAA, together in partnership with UNESCO, aspires to raise awareness, funds and concretely contribute to the preservation of our shared audiovisual memories from around the world.