

Digital Madness, Archival Theory and the Endangered Sound Archives of Radio Botswana

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Abstract

In recognition of the contributions of sound archives to the collective wisdom of humanity UNESCO has set aside 27 October as a day for the celebration of Audiovisual Heritage. And despite the shared universal definition of a record as any “document regardless of medium,” the trust placed on paper at the exclusion of other information carriers continues to dominate the mindset of many in Africa. The result of this bias has been little attention paid on the preservation of sound archives. At a professional level, while many theoretical assumptions have been made about the character and treatment of paper records, the literature on the preservation of sound archives continues to come from thinkers without a “mainstream” archival degree. Using the sound archives of Radio Botswana as a case study, this author applies traditional archival theory methods to this genre of records. By so doing the presenter hopes to consolidate, even critique, the application of traditional archival theory to sound archives. In the process of doing that, and with the theme of the conference in mind, an international call to halt the looming eclipse of Radio Botswana sound archives- in an age of digital madness- will be globally launched.

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1. Introduction

Even though the first record produced by humans is a sound, we take sound so much for granted. In fact the perception that audiovisual records are only good for entertainment is still pervasive. However, that perception is fast disappearing as more archival centres recognize the need to preserve sound archives. In the last few years there has been a proliferation of professional bodies dedicated to the proper preservation of sound archives. Among them Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA); Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC); International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF); Fédération Internationale des Archives de Télévision / International Federation of Television Archives

(FIAT/IFTA); Federation of Commercial Audiovisual Libraries International (FOCAL); International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA); SouthEast Asia & Pacific Audiovisual Archives Association(SEAPAVAA) and the Co-ordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (CCAAA). Even more interesting is the fact that the International Council on Archives (ICA), a global professional association of all archivists, is affiliated to CCAAA, rather than the other way round. Moreover, the terminology or jargon used by these audiovisual associations sometimes differs from that learnt in traditional archival setups and was one of the reasons that motivated this study.

Sound or voice is one of the most powerful means of conveying facts and actions by both literate and illiterate communities. The use of sound to communicate is not just a monopoly of humans only. Domestic and wild animals also communicate their emotions, and maybe their facts and their acts through sound. In its annual commemoration of the World Day for Audiovisual Heritage¹ UNESCO has underscored the importance of sound archives by reminding us that, the first moonwalk original recording that took place on 20 July 1969, cannot be located and is presumed lost. In Africa in general, and in Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, song, dance, oral traditions, folklore, together with the modern written record, are still the chief means of transmitting all forms of knowledge from one generation to the next.

Despite this fact archival theory has not engaged sound records with the same vigour that it has done with the written and the electronic record. Using the sound of Radio Botswana as a case study this research attempted to investigate the application of key components of archival theory to the sound archives of Radio Botswana, drawing in the process strength from Heather MacNeil who marshalled us to re-examine archival theory² as a way to challenge old truths. So, what are these components? These key components include:

- Acquisition
- Provenance, Respect des Fonds and Original Order
- Appraisal
- Arrangement and Description
- Access, Preservation and Digitization

In choosing these components I am alive to the fact I am opening myself up to a plethora of criticism. I am back to Vancouver today, to welcome the criticism because archival theory, like all theories, has not developed without controversy. Indeed, a theory that invites passive and monolithic responses is sterile, bankrupt and over time condemns itself to extinction. The above components might sound like a monotonous script to postmodern scholars. In “Archives, Records and Power...” Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz are fatigued by what they call “a script that has been naturalized by the routine repetition of past practice.”³ What Hugh Taylor has referred to as “archival fundamentalism or the reluctance to explore new areas of theoretical and practical growth,”⁴ Terry Cook warns that “a profession rooted in nineteenth-century positivism... may now be adhering to concepts, and...strategies and methodologies, that are no longer viable in a postmodern and computerized world.”

¹ UNESCO, “27 October Declared World Day for Audiovisual Heritage.” Also available at, http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=25525&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

² Heather MacNeil, “Archival Theory and Practice: Between Two Paradigms,” (Archives and Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research Col 1, no. 1 (September 2007): 517-545.

³ Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz, “Archives, Records and Power: From Postmodern Theory to Archival Performance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 171.

⁴ Ibid. 179.

2. The Primary Objectives of the Study and the Research Questions

The primary objectives of the study were to assess the application of key components of archival theory to the management of sound records at Radio Botswana Sound archives

2.1 Methodology

Data gathering methods of this study included interviews using face to face administered structured and unstructured interview questions, the researcher's personal observations and a literature review.

2.2 Location of the Study

Radio Botswana Music Archives, Gaborone, Botswana.

2.3 Population of the Study

All the three sound archivists who work for the Radio Botswana Music Archives were interviewed

2.4 Limitations of the Study

Bias is always a factor in both qualitative and quantitative research. I come from a mindset that believes that sound records are marginalized and have been given a raw deal in archives. The research could only get a snapshot of the Sound archives of Radio Botswana due to time constraints. The permission to undertake the research came very late. A more in-depth graduate work is needed to do justice to the study. However, despite these limitations I still believe that the findings of this study carry a high degree of validity.

2.5 Research Ethics

In most African governments the media falls directly under the Office of the President. The Office of the President granted the research permit based on the topic. Consent was given based on voluntary participation.

3. Findings of the Study

3.1 The Acquisition of Sound Archives by Radio Botswana Archives

Respondents stated that they acquire their records from Live Special programs, for example when they cover the President opening a school or a hospital, pre-recorded material or in the case of music through donations from artists. Retired Broadcasting officers also freely surrender their records to the Radio archives.

3.2 Provenance, Respect des fonds and Original Order

3.2.1 Provenance

In archives the terms provenance, respect des fonds and original order form the core or nucleus of archival theory. Provenance refers to the agency creating the records. As the primary creator of sound records held by the archives Radio Botswana can claim the provenance of these records. However, in

complex organizations, like Radio Botswana, with a lot of Directorates, one does not know whether to start with Radio Botswana as the provenance or to call a directorate provenance. 29 years ago Michel Duchein recognized this problem when he wrote that:

the agencies which possess numerous personnel and multiple powers are, in general, divided into areas called divisions, directorates, branches, sub-branches, departments, and so on, each of which exercises a definite part of the powers of the agency. It is clear that the records created by these divisions constitute organic wholes. There is, therefore, every interest in taking these divisions as the basis of internal arrangement of the fonds of the agency...⁵

This problem is bound to grow worse in the 21st century where multi-national chain store companies like Wal-Mart, Coca Cola, or Apple have become dominant. So, in short, archivists now need to address the question of where provenance begins and where it ends in huge complex organizations that have huge record producing departments under them.

3.2.2 Respect des Fonds

One cannot discuss respect des fonds without reference to provenance. Duchein says that the majority of definitions of respect des fonds rest upon provenance to the point where countries of Germanic language refer to it as *provenienzprinzip* or *principle de provenance*.⁶ Mario Fenyo, archivist of America, dismissed the concept of a fonds saying that no one knows what the fonds means, not even the French who invented it,⁷ Fenyo's conclusion, however, has not stopped subsequent archival scholars from recognizing the fonds as one of the most important discovery in archival science. In fact, Duchein goes as far as saying that:

with few exceptions, the principle of respect des fonds...is universally accepted as the basis of theoretical and practical archival science. Criticisms of the principle bear only.... on its applications and not on the principle itself. It is reasonable to think that it will never again be fundamentally questioned and that it constitutes a definitive fact of archival science.⁸

Heather MacNeil has also celebrated this principle. In "Archival Theory and Practice: Between Two Paradigms," MacNeil says, "the cardinal principle on which the medical profession is built is above all do no harm... Similarly, the cardinal principle on which the archival profession is built is respect des fonds. While its proper application is frequently undermined by a seemingly endless list of realities- inadequate resources, authority, education, training- the principle is, in its own way, presents an equally worthy focus of archival inspiration."⁹

On this principle this research found out that twenty years ago with limited archival education and training, without even knowing that they were doing the right thing, archivists of Radio Botswana Sound archives practiced respect des fonds. They did this by grouping similar sound records together under the genres of Reggae, Rock and Roll, African music, etc. This classification system led to the accumulation

⁵⁵ Michel Duchein, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of Respect des Fonds in Archival Science," (Archivaria 16): 78.

⁶ Duchein, 73.

⁷ Duchein, 68

⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁹ Heather MacNeil, "Archival Theory and Practice: Between Two Paradigms," *Archives and Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research Vol 1, no. 1* (September 2007): 541.

of records under these broad family names. All Bob Marley's records were kept together under Reggae. All the albums of the Beatles were together under Rock and Roll and African musicians' music were archived under African jazz. This system made it easy to see similar records archived together. This classification of the analogue sound records of radio Botswana affirmed the principle of "archives as universitatis rerum," the indivisible and interrelated nature of archives, articulated by Luciana Duranti in her article on "archival science."¹⁰ Respondents of this research lauded this system, saying that they never had any problem retrieving any song or tape that they wanted to play.

The success story that I have just described began to change drastically when management decided to replace these amateur archivists with graduates of library science. The principle of respect des fonds was replaced by chronological classification. All music albums entering the archives were no longer classified according to genre and artist but rather according to the date that the album entered the archives. Now retrieval and location of the song when it was needed became a big problem for the station.

This movement was a great regression that took Radio Botswana archives back to the days of Armand Camus and Pierre Daunou after the French revolution, when the duo decided to view records as discreet items and introduced chronological classification instead of records families. It took the courage of Natalis de Wailly¹¹ to reinstate the fonds as the most defining principle of archival science. In "Archival Science" Duranti talks of how ideas borrowed from the library methods created a real dichotomy between the theoretical and methodological concepts related to the nature, form, formation and management of archival documents against those that did not take into consideration the nature of archival materials as determined by the practical and administrative circumstances producing them.¹²

3.2.3 Original Order

The principle of respect des fonds is closely related to that of original order. Not only should records accumulate steadily under their families but the original order of their aggregation has to be respected as well. While this principle was found to be true for the analogue records of radio Botswana, it was not very for music that was archived digitally. Here, retrieval of any song posed no problem as long as the song's name or artist was known. This finding is in line with Heather MacNeil's assertion that in "paper based systems, where records are physically ordered in labelled files, usually in accordance with a classification scheme, the physical and contextual aspects of the records are intimately connected; original order has tended, for that reason, to be associated with physical arrangement. That association is no longer valid for most electronic records."¹³

3.3 Appraisal

Rather than use the technical term "appraisal" respondents were asked if they ever destroy sound and if so under what circumstances. All three respondents interviewed admitted that there are records that they erase a day or two after they have been broadcast. What became clearer then in this research is that some programs are more important than others. This makes it possible to develop a comprehensive retention schedule for the sound records of Radio Botswana.

¹⁰ Luciana Duranti, "Archival Science,"

¹¹ The circular of 24 April 1841 signed by Duchatel, the minister at the Ministry of Interior codified the principle of respect des fonds.

¹² Duranti., 7.

¹³ MacNeil., 526.

3.4 Arrangement and Description

The findings of this study showed that it was difficult to locate analogue records because of the system of chronological arrangement. There is a need to pay attention to the principle of respect des fonds. In the digital environment it did not matter whether records were arranged by the author or by the name of the creator because they would still be retrieved anywhere.

3.5 Access, Preservation and Digitization

Most archival repositories exist to provide access either to internal or external stakeholders or to both. Radio Botswana Sound Archives is no different. This research found out that it is easier for the staff to provide access to sound in the digital form than in analogue form for the simple reason that searching for the record in the digital environment takes split seconds while doing the same for analogue records might take forever. However, when asked about the sound quality and stability of the medium 2 out of 3 trusted the analogue records more. However, when asked whether they want to remain with analogue or digital records all the 3 archivists were eager to have their records digitized despite the fragility of the digital medium.

4. Conclusion

More detailed and sustained studies on sound records and archival theory at a graduate are needed. However, preliminary findings of this study show that the basic tenets of archival theory are applicable to sound records in both analogue and digital formats. For me personally, these preliminary findings reflect that archival theory is relevant for all kinds of records, including sound records.

