

# Preservation of audiovisual heritage

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## Abstract

Audiovisual heritage is becoming a more and more significant part of cultural heritage. It is associated with television, radio, films and visual studio industry production as well as multimedia products. Sound and moving image records should be recognized as part of our cultural heritage and as the most characteristic heritage of the 20th century. It is also important to recognize that we can't simply adopt the knowledge accumulated by museums, archives or libraries in the field of traditional preservation and conservation, but we must develop new solutions, suitable for audiovisual material preservation.

The common values of sound and moving image documental heritage are cultural, scientific, artistic, historical etc., which stress the quality and meaningful aspects of said heritage. This attitude (audiovisual archive is considered only as a part of a larger institution (library, traditional archive or museum)) could be considered as a threat for safeguarding moving image and sound documents.

The goal of this paper is to discuss institutional preservation policies, main characteristics and value of audiovisual collections; to present regional and international awareness for initiatives based on the Baltic Audiovisual Archival Council experience.

**Keywords:** Audiovisual, heritage, preservation, image, records, film, visual studio, archive

Audiovisual heritage is becoming a more and more significant part of cultural heritage. It is associated with television, radio, films and visual studio industry production as well as multimedia products. Sound and moving image records should be acknowledged as part of our cultural heritage and as the most characteristic heritage of the 20th century.

This paper is based on Ray Edmondson's philosophy and principles of audiovisual archiving. Comparison of traditional memory institutions and audiovisual archive is suitable for an analysis of audiovisual preservation in the Baltic region and provides good background for further development of solutions that are necessary in order to preserve sound and image recordings.

Traditionally there are three common types of memory institutions: libraries, museums and general archives. Libraries keep collections of published materials in all formats and share them with society. Museums are responsible for collecting various types of objects, artefacts and associated documents that are used for education, research and enjoyment. General archives might be identified as a repository where one can access selected inactive records in any format, usually unique and unpublished. Different rules and regulations are applied at each of said institutions and this is usually reflected in local or national legislation. In addition, it is typical that specific day to day practices of preservation or description methodologies exist in paper-based archives or libraries. This is due to the nature and properties of the accumulated collections. Nevertheless nowadays the majority of memory institutions may have audiovisual items and these objects share similar technical characteristics but the level of preservation and access is not the same everywhere. This is especially common when audiovisual records are only a small part of the whole collection. These records lose focus and attention but that doesn't mean that they are less valuable than other items.

Institutions such as universities, academies, institutes and other research or academic centres can also have archives in organizational structures even if there is no legal obligation to collect and keep materials as the primary mission of selected organizations. These archives are used for research or they were formed as a consequence of research activity and are unique but not easily accessible by the general public or reuse. In most of these places one can find audiovisual contents such as records of oral history at folklore institutes or audiovisual art academies. Compared to a traditional library, museum or archive very often there is a lack of standardized archival practices. Management of institutional archives is dependent on available resources and employee attitudes. An interesting example is National Broadcaster, where archival materials vary from analogue to digital, from photo to film, but there is no doubt that all items accumulated and collected by the broadcaster are part of national heritage. Unfortunately it is hard to find any evidence of governmental supervision as to how these collections should be properly maintained, including restoration, digitization and all other related activities. The fact that almost all contents created or acquired by national TV and radio stations was funded by tax payers should be also considered. In this light society has a right to demand access to audiovisual collections and this is impossible without preservation. Another problem is that development of broadcaster's archive might be delegated to the information technology department where hardware and software of digital repository is seen as the most important part of the whole archive. Sometimes IT staff can argue that implementation of standardized archival methodologies and practices only reduces performance of the installed systems as these are "live" archives where materials are used on a day-to-day basis but not planned for long-term preservation.

### **Institutional context of audiovisual heritage**

Institutional context observed from a distance shows that published and unpublished audiovisual records of the same importance and value are kept in many places; however the level of maintenance and access is very different and this should be evaluated as a threat and risk to preservation of audiovisual heritage.

According to Ray Edmondson "Audiovisual heritage" can be defined as "Recorded sound, radio, film, television, video or other productions comprising moving images and/or recorded sounds, whether or not primarily intended for distribution to the public". A broader definition will also include all technical equipment that is necessary to replay the recordings as well as items associated with audiovisual production: costumes, cinema posters, sketches, etc.

Today activities of traditional memory institutions are widely recognized and supported at governmental and public bodies. But why it is necessary to take care of audiovisual heritage and why this should be on the top of the agenda?

Compared with traditional documents, video and audio recordings are characterized by specific features differentiating them from the cultural context:

- ⤴ Metadata System. Traditional description based on vertical relationship or provenance concept is inappropriate as audio-visual content usually has no index or single author, such as a book. Detailed description of content is very important.
- ⤴ Fragility. More than any other type of document, audio-visual heritage is the most vulnerable to time - obsolescence of analogue carriers makes a huge influence to content loss.
- ⤴ Commercial value. Audiovisual documents are used to create new productions more often than other traditional materials.
- ⤴ Reflection of 20th and 21st centuries.

- ⤴ All of these documents cannot be used without the necessary hardware. Playback equipment changes very often and obsolescence is very rapid.

In addition digitization of audiovisual records is very complex and requires more technical and human resources than digitization of printed materials. A significant amount of born digital images, videos and sounds that are available in a large variety of forms and formats cannot be ignored. But preservation of born digital content can only be achieved with carefully planned long-term digital preservation strategy. Actions such as migration or content quality control cannot be postponed.

In many cases there is no need to establish new audiovisual archives where audiovisual collections could be transferred from other institutions. It is sufficient to recognize that we can't simply adopt the knowledge accumulated by museums, archives or libraries in the field of traditional preservation and conservation but we have to develop new solutions, suitable for audiovisual material preservation.

Baltic Audiovisual Archival Council (BAAC) can be taken as an example, how this can be partly achieved through regional cooperation of professionals with limited resources and limited governmental recognition. BAAC is an independent non-profit organization, founded as a voluntary association in 2006 with the goal to foster cooperation between public and private archives, broadcasting and TV archives, libraries and museums that possess collections of materials on the Baltic States, Scandinavian countries and the worldwide Baltic diaspora. The Council is committed to reviewing and ensuring the maintenance of these historically valuable collections. Today the organization unites more than 40 institutional members, organizes annual conferences and professional training every year.

## **References**

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