

October 16-18, 2002 / The Hague, The Netherlands
 Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) International Conference

School for Scanning: Creating, Managing and Preserving Digital Assets

Selection procedures of Memoriav

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"How much audiovisual tradition is too much audiovisual tradition?" asked a Swiss economist at the beginning of the nineties in a rather polemic article. He compared the need for more systematic archiving with practices of the former East German Republic where certain documents concerning disobedient citizens carried a stamp "Für immer und ewig aufbewahren" - to preserve for ever. At the time of this question, for us it had more or less the same meaning as "How much water would be too much water in the desert?"

But behind that story is another one, more serious and more important. The discussion about audiovisual archiving raises immediately several questions:

- how to keep the archiving process under control for what is an enormous quantity of audiovisual production;
- how to deal with the particularly difficult situation found in audiovisual archiving due to the decay of carriers and obsolescence of techniques;
- and finally:
- how to set content related selection criteria which are free from any ambiguous judgements on the value of a document.

In the following I shall try to approach these questions on different levels, beginning with a description of the rather atypical situation in Switzerland, then there will be some basic strategic questions about selection and deselection to consider, a description of the criteria for selection of projects of Memoriav will follow and finally the crucial theme of selection inside a specific project will be faced.

In Switzerland at the beginning of the nineties, audiovisual archiving was just taking its first steps. The national film archive, which had existed for roughly 50 years, had never had an active preservation policy and, as a consequence, no budget for this task. The national sound archive, which had been created in the second half of the eighties, was very poorly funded and suffered from the lack of legal deposit guidelines. Radio and television had no legal obligation to keep anything and therefore had only archives for further production needs, often in very poor storage conditions and without any access control.

At the same time new radio and television legislation mentioned for the first time the possibility (but not the obligation) to keep "transmissions of value" as part of the national heritage for the future. Immediately the National Library and the National Archives became interested in the problem. A small group of people, amongst them the directors of the main audiovisual collections in the country began to consider what could be reasonable bases for keeping the audiovisual heritage alive. A very ambitious project for a large centre of audiovisual archives failed not only for financial reasons but also because it was contrary to the federalist structure of Switzerland. The solution was for a network to be created, more adapted to the political situation in the country. Therefore Memoriav was founded in 1995 with the stated aim "to enhance the preservation of and access to the audiovisual heritage of Switzerland". Amongst the founding members

were 3 government bodies, the National Archives, the National Library and the Federal Office of Communications, 3 private foundations, the National sound archive, the National film archive and the Swiss Institute for Preservation of Photographs and finally the holding of public radio and television SRG SSR idée suisse with its seven business units. This structure proved to be a good solution and developed quite rapidly.

Since 1998 Memoriav has been annually funded by the Swiss Government, in 2002 with 3 million Swiss Francs. The real cost of Memoriav's "reasonable bases" for archiving the national audiovisual heritage however had been estimated at 7 million a year. Even so it was decided by the ministry of finances that 3 million would be enough – "too much to die, not enough to live" as we say in Switzerland.

And this is another element to consider when talking about selection procedures: what to do when you are in the paradoxical situation of being asked to save the audiovisual heritage of your country with less than half of the funding needed?

I am coming now to my second topic: the strategic background for decisions on selection and deselection.

What traditional archives and libraries discovered in the last decades with the problem of acid paper is very common in the audiovisual archives: the dramatic decay of information carriers. Our first action was dedicated to directly threatened documents: the so called lacquer discs or acetates with many valuable early broadcasting programmes but also recordings from research in the field of linguistics and ethnography, nitrate based film material and photographs of the nineteenth century often damaged by poor storage conditions and careless handling. Later we added the 35mm and 16 mm sep mag tapes with film sounds contaminated by the vinegar syndrome. For all these cases the main criterion for selection is the degree of deterioration; content is less important due to the fact that in many cases only roughly 10% of the footage has survived.

Within this sphere, other technical decisions had to be taken: is it reasonable to spend a lot of time and money to save one document in very bad shape or should we optimise our action with the quantity of better preserved material. In this situation content criteria become important: if a document in bad shape is part of a larger set of better preserved items with content of high value, a special effort is justified. Another crucial situation is when you know that a document in bad shape can only be transferred once because it will break down during the transfer process. According to strict rules of restoration ethics you are not allowed to do anything that can destroy the original. But if you know that in any case within a few months the carrier will have completely broken down you will probably decide to try the last chance, as we indeed do.

Beside the decay of carriers the obsolescence of the audiovisual information systems is one of the most burning issues. Video technique which has been produced on more than one hundred formats since its introduction on the market in 1953 is particularly troubled by this problem. By the way, another serious problem is arising in the field of sound recordings. We estimate that within 15 years no more spare parts for replay equipment will be available for ¼" tape. In both cases we have such huge quantities of material which is often poorly documented, that even the establishment of an inventory as a basis for the selection process is very time consuming and expensive.

In this situation, two strategic options have to be taken in consideration:

Obviously the preservation by transfer to the digital domain remains the most efficient solution with regard to longevity and technological currency. But we know that at the current stage of technological

development only a small part of the holdings can be transferred because at least 1 ½ times the duration of the original sound recording is needed for transfer and automation of the process is still in early stages.

So, what do we do with material which has not been transferred?

With respect to ¼' tape, but also other carriers with a good life expectancy, the preservation of the obsolete reproduction technology and the know-how for its handling is a valuable alternative. As we know that magnetic tapes suitably and safely stored can survive for decades, remote archives with adapted transfer technology can assure at least another 50 years of survival for traditional analogue documents. Of course they are not available immediately, but once destroyed they are no longer available at all.

The first measures to be taken in this situation are to assure that obsolete recording and replay equipment are preserved. 10 machines can deliver spare parts for several decades. The other problem is to preserve the knowledge of how to handle the machines. Technical manuals have to be kept and technicians who have worked with this technology should transfer their knowledge to younger people. This is particularly important in the case of rather complex video technologies such as 2" and 1" tape and U-Matic.

This excursion into a more strategic part of the process was necessary in order to show that selection is not a "one-zero-decision" but many other factors also to consider, among them the life expectancy of carriers and information systems, the evolution of transfer techniques, the importance of access time and the future possibility to reconstruct obsolete technology at reasonable costs.

Let's move on now to the selection criteria of Memoriav for funding projects. The overall aim of this activity is, according to the statutes of the association, to enhance the preservation and the accessibility of the audiovisual heritage of Switzerland. I shall comment on the main topics as found also in your hand out:

[Comments on text hand out]

In general, the relationship of the material to Switzerland is of course an important criterion. It has been widened in the case of the 35mm nitrate films sourced from the International Committee of Red Cross. Their content has nothing to do with Switzerland, but transfer of these films on safety was largely financed by us because the ICRC is, as an organisation, 100% Swiss. Another example are three films from the famous French director Méliès, which were found in a shoe box in the back office of a small museum in Vevey. These films have been restored with our contribution, as they were preserved in our country. It is obviously important when you choose material of a more international character for a project to check if anybody else has already done the job. I am convinced that hundreds of films and thousands of photographs are restored several times due to the lack of communication.

The balance between projects in the field of photographs, films, video and sound has more or less been established on the budget level. Difficulties arise from the fact that the restoration of a film for example is much more expensive than a similar project for photographs. On the other hand, photographic collections are much more numerous than film collections. The consideration of a certain balance in the geographical distribution of the projects is primarily a political item. If Memoriav wants to survive it must be strongly established in the federal structure of the country.

That a financial perspective plays a role in the selection may shock you, but I remind you that only 40% of the funding needed is actually available.

Amongst the quality criteria item 1), which could also be called an inventory, is of great importance. It is interesting to see that for an evaluation of the importance of the project for Swiss cultural heritage, an overview of the heritage at least in the field of audiovisual documents would be necessary. Unfortunately that overview or national inventory does not yet exist and it is very difficult to raise funds for that kind of work. Inventories are very useful tools but their visibility is poor.

Obviously every project has to consider conditions of preservation, technical obsolescence and conditions for access to a holding. As mentioned, some of these elements can be of considerable importance namely decay of carriers due to poor preservation conditions and technical obsolescence. The ultimate loss of a collection or considerably higher costs for its preservation can be the price for postponing an intervention. Concerning the volume, duration and costs of a project we have to consider the limited financial resources of our association and the need for balance between different media and geographical areas.

Copyright is often a neglected element in the planning of preservation projects. It is absolutely vital that right holders accept that when public money is invested in the preservation and even restoration of their works, that this must be counterbalanced by free access to these documents for non-profit use and that commercial benefits generated with preserved and restored works have to be shared with the public institutions who have taken care of the work. If this condition is not fulfilled, hands off the collection, even if it is of extreme value.

It seems obvious that preservation and access to the collections which have been saved are granted long term. Experience shows that this is not always the case. Restored photographs are often damaged again by the poor handling of archive staff or users and digitised holdings can be stored on CD or streaming cassette for years in a desk drawer. Therefore project planning has to consider a much longer period than the few months or years of the preservation work. This is also necessary to assure that the documents once in public access carry clearly the message that they have been preserved by a project financed with public money. A potential for presentation in public events and the media is also of high importance.

The opinions about how to carry out the work for preservation can considerably differ from one institution to another. Currently there is no officially recognised code of ethics in our field and we have to be very careful in choosing the professionals who are, for instance, transferring audio or video material to a new carrier and format. The temptation to "improve" the quality of sounds and images is enormous and manipulations are often hidden behind the argument of unavoidable technical needs. Partners in the field of broadcasting are often in favour of those practices as they aim to have historical material, which fits into current quality standards.

Last but not least a word about financial problems. Due to the situation where there is in any case not enough public funding available, we try to find project partners who are ready to participate with human resources, infrastructure and even cash in the project. Ideally every Swiss Franc we are investing in a project should generate in the partner institution another Swiss Franc for the project or a performance of the same value in favour of the project.

Finally we arrive at the last level of our topic: a project has been chosen, and a selection process has to be planned. Let us see what happens in the case of the large archives of productions of Swiss public radio on 1/4' tape. These holdings are threatened in different ways. Most important is the problem of obsolescence, as the 1/4' technology will completely disappear from the market in the next 10 to 15 years. Early tapes on acetate based materials are also threatened by the break down of the carrier which becomes brittle. Finally a mechanical problem arises from the numerous splices which often crack when you rewind the tape. On another level these holdings are also threatened because it becomes more and more complicated to use these documents in the new digital broadcasting systems (the same situation as with 16mm film in tv stations). Therefore, broadcasters are even less interested in the material and try to get rid of it. The selection process in this case also has different levels.

As the project is based on a partnership between the public radio and the National Sound Archive, two founding members of Memoriav, the selection process has to consider two different interests: the broadcast archive is looking for material which can be re-used in programming. The heritage archive on the other hand aims to a collection which is useful to historical research. The difference is sometimes considerable: in the case of the famous speech of President Kennedy in Berlin, the broadcaster is probably only interested in the original sound of the famous phrase "ich bin ein Berliner". Historians would like to know much more about the context, for instance the comments which were made immediately after the speech.

We agreed with our partners from public radio that the lowest selection level should be a series or genre of transmission. To realise this concept we had to do a lot of research on programme history because public radio in Switzerland has many times been reorganised and programme structures have been constantly changed. Transmissions have been migrated from one organising unit to another and renamed many times.

Long running series have been given priority and among them those with constantly changing content, as for instance broadcast news. They contain not only primary information on many local, regional, national and international events but also on the evolution of the media itself. News has also a considerable impact on public opinion because of its large audience.

On the basis of a selection according to "programme value" our colleagues from the radio established a matrix with two axes; horizontal – the state of preservation of the material, vertical – the value of a transmission series for the programme. We can see here again other selection criteria. A very high value is attributed to music productions because of their high production costs and the potential of re-use in the programme or as a publication on CD. In a heritage context these documents have lesser priority because the repertoire is often international and does not really differ from any other music production in the world. We calculated that with the technical possibilities of today the digitisation of 25% of the archives of Swiss Public Radio would last 8 years and cost 10 million Swiss Francs (€6.8 millions).

In some pilot projects in the cultural domain we tried a completely different approach. Literary archives, for example, can be project partners. Here writers and other personalities of cultural life have deposited their manuscripts. The idea is to complete these materials with radio and television programmes – features, interviews, discussions etc. – concerning these same authors. As many of these programmes had until now not been accessible, there was great interest in them even from specialised scholars. In this sort of project selection is in many aspects easier, but another more technical problem arises. As the selection goes down to the level of a single item, which is often part of a document with several other contributions, the question is if the whole document should be saved or only the single item. We did not really find an answer to this question but it shows how difficult selection can be.

In conclusion I would like to summarise as follows:

The selection practice of Memoriav is currently neither uniform nor systematic. Its strategy is rather pragmatic, based on the needs of the founding members and the aim of further development of the association.

The main problems we face are:

- lack of a comprehensive overview of the audiovisual heritage of Switzerland,
- insufficient funding by the Federal Government and
- differing interests of the founding members and project partners.

I would like to comment briefly on these three points:

An overview would be a very time consuming and costly undertaking, having a rather poor visibility and therefore not being politically very rewarding.

Insufficient funding is mainly due to two problems: 1st the strong federalist structure of the country which weakens every national initiative and 2nd the unusual and future orientated approach of Memoriav, which is difficult to integrate in a rather conservative legal framework.

Concerning the differing interests of the partners we have to remember the fact that selection criteria have always been established within institutions with comparable tasks – for instance broadcast archives, state archives or libraries. The defining of preservation needs for cultural heritage on the one hand and broadcast archives on the other hand has never been approached in a systematic way.

As it is a clear trend that information in written form, images and sounds are converging in the digital domain and that preservation technology becomes more and more complex and costly new models of co-operation breaking down traditional barriers have to be developed and this is what Memoriav in a very pragmatic way is trying to do.