

Memoriav, the network for the preservation of the audiovisual heritage of Switzerland

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The relationship a country has with its cultural heritage is closely tied to its understanding of its own identity, which in turn is tied to its political, social and cultural structure. Memoriav, the organisation founded in Switzerland with the aim of improving the preservation and communication of its audiovisual heritage, is easier to understand if one is aware that this small country with 7.4 million inhabitants is divided into 26 cantons, whose cultural sovereignty is as anchored into the constitution as the existence of its four language regions.

When, at the beginning of the 1990's, a small group of experts were charged by the interior ministry to suggest measures to improve the situation of our audiovisual heritage, an initial central solution was proposed – a centre for audiovisual information in which expertise and infrastructure would be bundled rationally. The suggestion was deemed as being too centralist, even by those circles that would have profited most from the scheme. As a replacement, a concept was next developed that was founded on existing institutions, to create a network of these institutions with the objective of improving the coordination of expertise and the implementation of available funding. Its structure would be light and based significantly on the will of all participants to collaborate voluntarily.

Institutions with large collections of audiovisual records of national importance participated in the founding of this network. The institutions included: from the federal government, the Swiss Federal Archives and the Swiss National Library; from the private sector but financed by the government, the special collections of the Swiss National Sound Archives and the Swiss Film Archive; from the photography sector the Swiss Institute for the Conservation of Photography; as the most extensive audiovisual collection, the public radio corporation SRG SSR idée Suisse, with its 7 business units for television and radio; and finally, the Federal Office for Communication, the regulatory authority for radio and television in Switzerland.

Before the network was institutionalised through the founding of an association, concrete measures were set in motion to protect those audiovisual records in the most amount of danger; using specially assigned federal funds, a selection of broadcasts edited onto acetate discs from the first 20 years of Swiss radio were transferred onto digital storage media, nitrate films from

the collection of the Swiss Film Archives were transferred onto Safety Film and photographs from the 19th century were restored. The results of this work were immediately communicated to the general public: the radio broadcasts on three compact discs of programme clips in Italian, French and German; the films were included in the programme of the Locarno Film Festival – Switzerland's largest film festival – and the restored photographs of the photographer and inventor Carlo Ponti were the subject of an exhibition in Vevey.

After the association was founded in 1995, there was still no secure financial base, so that the projects had to be exclusively financed with special funding from the federal government. The members of the organisation's board were all volunteers. Nevertheless, in 1995 comprehensive long-term projects were begun, such as the collaboration, under the title of "Political Information" between the Swiss Film Archive, television, radio and the Swiss Federal Archives, with the objective of preserving the newsreel *Filmwochenschau* and broadcasts with political content from radio and television, and making the records accessible to users in the Swiss Federal Archives.

The example of the nightly news of Swiss television shows how necessary it was to make a long-term effort in the maintenance of these archives: from the first 3½ seasons (1953-1956) of the show, only the review shown at the end of each year was available; as of 1957, the individual reports were to a great extent still available, but the original presentation and comments of the anchors were lost and in the end only available in the form of written manuscripts transmitted by chance. The "Political Information" project is ongoing. After the nightly news, regional news programmes and news magazines were also preserved in the same way and again made accessible.

The "Political Information" project was not without detractors. Those who expect Memoriav to focus on work in the cultural sector could not understand that so much money was being spent on the preservation of images with no cultural value. This discussion is repeatedly carried out in Memoriav's other spheres of activity. Should art photography, artistic movies, recordings of musical and literary works of art be given precedence over records that are mainly of interest due to their content? In its work thus far, Memoriav has mainly concentrated on audiovisual collections of documentary value, not least because funding is more easily found for the preservation of works of art and because in giving public access to artistically valuable records, one quickly comes up against the limitations of copyright problems.

However, Memoriav did venture into the cultural sector as early as 1996. To complement the collection in the Swiss Literary Archives, radio broadcasts about and with Swiss authors from French-speaking Switzerland were evaluated and selected in a complex selection process and then transferred in digital form to an experimental mass storage volume, which can be accessed directly from certain workstations in the Literary Archives. The project has since been expanded to include authors from all four language regions, and in addition to radio broadcasts, television recordings are also included.

In photography, it was especially the availability of images over the Internet that stood at the forefront of the new millennium. Virtual collections are set to replace the proverbial burrowing through the archives. With the project “La vie quotidienne au fil du temps”, the Médiathèque Valais brought together 20,000 images from 10 important collections in Switzerland, digitised them in varying degrees of resolution, and catalogued the contents in RERO, the Library Network of Western Switzerland. Since then, the images can be accessed directly onscreen via the catalogue entry.

A description of all projects could continue here endlessly; there are meanwhile 90, 50 of which have been completed. (For a description of all projects, as well as extensive references to literature on the preservation of the audiovisual heritage, please see www.memoriav.ch.) It seems to us to be more important to reflect on the experiences gathered over the last 10 years. Our main thread will be the article in the statutes of our association, which lists Memoriav's 6 main duties.

a) To record our audiovisual heritage.

We must first determine that the definition of the audiovisual heritage, as used by Memoriav, does not correspond to international usage: photography, which plays an important role in Memoriav's programme, is not generally included in the sum of audiovisual records. Including photography has proven to be sensible, however, because the technical problems of long-term preservation, restoration and communication are similar to those of film, video and audio recordings.

The phrase in the first article, “To record our audiovisual heritage”, means getting an overview of the audiovisual collections in this country, to create a kind of national inventory. This task is not listed first by chance – it reflects the chronology of archival procedures. Memoriav was not able to adhere strictly to this chronology, however, because for reasons of the visibility of its actions, it had to present concrete results as soon as possible. From 1995 onwards, however, there were different projects with part inventories in film and photography, as well as, in one case, a cantonal inventory of audiovisual records. These projects turned up various problems: the majority of the audiovisual heritage is not contained in special collections, but rather in the mixed collections of libraries, museums and archives. There, their existence is somewhat shadowy; their content has not been indexed; they are stored in unsuitable climatic conditions; the staff has not been sufficiently trained to deal with this material and there are often no suitable devices for watching or listening to the contents. This situation makes it difficult to preserve the data, on the one hand because the staff has difficulties answering even simple questions about the collections, and on the other because institutions don’t like discussing collections about which they know specifically that they are not being administrated according to professional regulations. Under these conditions, reliable data may only be able to be gathered locally by specialists, which is tied to significant organisational and financial expenditure. Memoriav has spent approximately CHF 720,000 (= €460,000) thus far. It is nowhere near obtaining a complete overview, even though having one is extremely important, because only solid statistical material can force decision-makers in politics and administration to give the audiovisual heritage the attention it deserves. In 2008, a report will be issued that for the first time will give information on the scope and condition of the audiovisual heritage in Switzerland.

b) To take suitable measures to save and protect the audiovisual heritage in Switzerland.

Memoriav must constantly stress that technical measures alone will only half complete our tasks, because many outside observers evaluate all work effort as “overhead” that is not made in direct connection to restoration, digitising and transferring recordings to new storage media. The low level of status still given to audiovisual recording as part of the cultural heritage makes permanent communication necessary, with the objective of gaining, for our audiovisual heritage, equality with the traditional mobile cultural heritage.

For a long time, the legal foundation for the financing of Memoriav by the federal government was insufficiently guaranteed. Although we could count on individual articles of federal law concerning the national library and archiving as well as radio and television, in times of rigorous budget restrictions this was risky. Thanks to a continuous relationship with the federal administration and to parliament, a law was passed in 2005 that clearly regulates the financial participation of the federal government and that gives them the power to set a financial framework for 4 years at a time.

The communication of information in printed or electronic form to specialist circles as well as consulting and continued training are other activities that are directly linked to the mandate of preserving our audiovisual heritage. These are relatively inexpensive preventive measures that already in many cases have led to the improvement of the situation for a previously neglected audiovisual collection.

In addition to the targeted communication of specialist knowledge, the public at large must also be reached. Memoriav therefore regularly organises public events during which experts comment live on a specific subject regarding sound and image recordings. Also, in collaboration with the Swiss Film Archive, a network of cinemas is being set up in which restored movies and documentaries will be shown.

- c) To better evaluate our audiovisual heritage, to set up and operate an information network to interconnect the institutions active in this sector.

The beginning of this paper already describes how Memoriav was established as a network of a small group of institutions, which maintains a significant part of our nationally important audiovisual heritage. These groups came together based on the realisation that the status of films, videos, sound recording and photographs with regard to preservation and access is extremely unsatisfactory. The individual special archives such as the Swiss National Sound Archives and the Swiss Film Archive did not carry the necessary weight to improve this situation, and libraries and archives were mainly concerned with traditional material. Only with the founding of Memoriav could a lobby be created that was slowly able to gain an audience.

Meanwhile, 160 institutions from all over the country have joined the network, some of them have already participated in Memoriav projects. The objective for the coming years is to strengthen the network by forming regional and cantonal competence centres, so that projects for the protection of the audiovisual heritage may increasingly be created on this level as well.

d) To promote and facilitate access to audiovisual sources for researchers.

Access to audiovisual sources are significantly dependent on three factors: the adequate indexing of content, the availability of consultation copies of sufficient quality and the legal situation.

The indexing problem is exacerbated by the fact that in contrast to traditional archive and library materials, there are no norms to link the audiovisual materials together. Memoriav has found a suitable solution to this situation: heterogeneous data collections are gathered together on the data platform Memobase and structured according to the international standard Dublin Core. A search engine makes it possible to find photographs, films, and radio and television broadcasts using individually selected keywords.

From a technical standpoint, it would also be possible to make the records themselves accessible via Memobase. The fact that this is currently only possible with photographs is due to partly to copyright reasons and partly to business-strategic reservations on the part of radio and television institutions. An alternative to this situation in future could be controlled workstations in certain institutions, from which parts of the television and radio archives could be accessed. The possibility of also downloading the records would most likely not yet be possible.

The legal situation inherent in archiving and using audiovisual sources remains unclear. As a member of an association of copyright users (DUN), Memoriav, together with other groups, advocates the clear legal regulation of the non-commercial use of audiovisual records by researchers, students and educators for the exemption from copyright laws.

The use of audiovisual sources by researchers has not yet made much progress in Switzerland. One of Memoriav's duties is therefore to make contact with potential users on the university

level, to make them aware of existing possibilities and to give them the courage to formulate their wishes and demands. To this end, an international symposium will take place this year in collaboration with the Università della Svizzera Italiana entitled “Heard and Seen: The Audiovisual Heritage and the Sciences”.

- e) To observe the development of technologies in the field of the protection of the audiovisual heritage.

The breakdown of storage media and technical obsolescence are the two main problems in conserving audiovisual materials. For each new Memoriav project, the technical requirements must be tested anew. Compromises are often inevitable for financial reasons, for example in the field of video technology, for which a standardised digital format without data loss has yet to be developed.

Even today, it is basically irresponsible to save 16mm film, as found extensively in television archives, onto the data-reducing video format MPEG IMX. But with material rapidly decomposing, especially due to vinegar syndrome, and with conditional and limited funding, another procedure is not possible at the moment. In this situation it is important to preserve the original films as well as possible so that they may be safely stored; to slow down the natural decomposition process, so that the material may be accessed as necessary.

But knowledge about the status of technology must also be passed on in suitable form, therefore, Memoriav publishes recommendations for the preservation of photographs, sound recordings, films and videos, which have been written by experts and are regularly updated.

- f) To ensure the best possible implementation of funding through the appropriate measures.

Since 1998, Memoriav receives regular financial support from the federal government; between 1998-2001 CHF 1,800,000 (= €1,149,000) annually, since 2002 CHF 3,000,000 (= €1,915,000). Additional funding comes from SRG SSR idée suisse (CHF 300,000 = €191,000) and from association members (CHF 100,000 = €64,000). According to a study made in 2001, this corresponds to approximately 1/3 of the minimum necessary to systematically save our audiovisual heritage.

In light of this situation, Memoriav tries on the one hand to keep administrative costs as low as possible, and on the other to ensure partner institutions involved in projects participate financially. At most 50% of project costs are generally covered by Memoriav; project partners may contribute their share through work effort and infrastructure or by finding third-party funding. This approximately doubles the sum Memoriav is able to provide for projects.

Financial conditions have no influence on the quality of technical work, restoration, transfers or digitising. Only professional work done in accordance with international norms can lead to a sustainable result. Cheap solutions have always proven themselves to be a mistake in the audiovisual field.

Conclusion

The situation of Switzerland's audiovisual heritage is generally no different from that of Europe, as shown by a survey taken by the EU project TAPE (Training for Audiovisual Preservation, www.tape-online.net) at 375 institutions in 34 countries throughout Europe. The preliminary version of the report on the results of the survey states: "The general picture that emerges is that the large majority of audiovisual collections are mixed collections and that the most of them are in organizations that manage also or primarily other materials." And to the issue of expertise, the following paragraph comments: "Irrespective of the complexities involved in making reliable estimates, in any case the responses make overwhelmingly clear that there is a lot that is simply not known. The fact that there are such serious gaps in the basic information on size of contents of collections is in itself a risk for the survival of the audiovisual heritage." (Yola de Lusnet: Audiovisual collections in Europe – first draft texts. May 2006).

The TAPE project, supplemental to the PrestoSpace project (www.prestospace.net) – which is concerned with radio and television – concentrated on collections outside the sphere of broadcasting. This division makes sense, in that radio and television have significantly more funding available for archiving than other collections do. In Switzerland, the financial contributions the federal government makes to the Swiss National Sound Archives and the Swiss Film Archive are in no way proportional to the mandate given to them, and the arrears in processing the collections are large as a consequence. Outside these special institutes, the

situation is even more serious, because there is often not enough expertise available to ensure even the planning of the appropriate maintenance of the collections.

It is surprising how much time and effort it takes before the audiovisual heritage can receive the recognition that corresponds to its role in today's society. The preservation of this important part of the collective memory is therefore a complex endeavour, whose span reaches from emergency measures for especially endangered records to the promotion of the use of audiovisual sources by education and research. Switzerland's network solution has proven itself to be especially suitable for mastering this variety of tasks in a coordinated way, despite difficult financial conditions.