

Why are these Treasures Hidden? The Place of Audiovisual Archives in a Strategic Framework for the Preservation of the National Documentary Heritage

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Paper presented at the IASA-BAAC Conference 2007, Riga Latvia

Published in: IASA journal no 31, July 2008, p. 55-58

The idea for the title of this article comes from a study released in 2004 by the UK Audiovisual Strategy Steering Group: "Hidden Treasures". It begins with the statement: "The rapidly expanding audiovisual world touches virtually all aspects of our lives in one form or another providing a unique contribution to our heritage" and continues: "However, despite (or perhaps, because of) the familiarity and all-pervasiveness of audiovisual culture, the status of moving images and sounds as heritage assets remains insecure."¹

My aim is to investigate the reasons for the situation the audiovisual cultural heritage finds itself in, based on a study carried out in Switzerland. The study's perspective is unusual, because its authors do not stem from the archive segment, instead they work with procedures used in public administration. Since 2005, Peter Knoepfel and Mirta Olgiati of the Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration IDHEAP have been devising, for the federal government, principles for a policy for the preservation of the collective national memory.²

National memory building process

National memory is considered the sum of information accessible to citizens in the form of records of all kinds. In this sense, it is a common good. One of the specific characteristics of the common good is that it provides services which, for political reasons, cannot be limited to a specific user group.

If we look at the audiovisual cultural heritage under this aspect, this brings with it an initial problem: published material – not just the audiovisual – is also the private property of various holders of rights, authors, actors, publishers and producers. At the same time, many of these records are meant to be available to the general public as part of national memory. One way out of this dilemma could be clear regulations on exceptions and limitations for copyrights, so that the non-commercial use of these records could be permitted without restrictions.

Unfortunately, we are a long way away from that solution.

¹ Hidden Treasure: The UK Audiovisual Archive Strategic Framework, UK Audiovisual Strategy Steering Group, March 2004, p.2 (pdf: www.bufovc.ac.uk/faf/publications.htm)

² Peter Knoepfel, Mirta Olgiati: National Memorybuilding process; the Emergence of Institutional regimes for collective resources in the field of Sustainable Management of the Documentary Heritage, IASCP Europe Regional Meeting, Brescia 2006 (pdf: <http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/archive/00001746>)

So which services does the common good “national memory” provide? We all know that knowing about our history is vital for us to orient ourselves in the present and in the future, and that this ability for orientation contributes much to the stability and consistency of a country’s society. Politicians and other decision-makers also like to praise this achievement in their official speeches, but when it comes time to make the necessary financial means available to preserve national memory, this concern is shifted to the “nice-to-have” column. The problem for the audiovisual cultural heritage that arises in this area is twofold: until recently, images and sound were evaluated as an expression of the entertainment industry and therefore ranked at the bottom of the hierarchy of historical sources and rarely recognised as part of the collective memory. The fact that their preservation is coupled with much more complex problems than that of the traditional cultural heritage strengthens the tendency to exclude them from the canon of elements of the collective memory.

Like many other common goods, national memory develops from a collective production process that takes places in several steps. It is interesting to note that the description of this process is very similar to that of the Open Archive Information System (OAIS), running through from production to the records’ use.³ Each of the four steps contains a series of criteria, which lead to the selection of the material: memorability, worthiness of memorisation, actual memorisation in the form of storage, and accessibility of the stored data to the public.

Memorability

The decision on whether information should be preserved depends on if it can suitably be recorded for long-term storage. As is generally known, the recording method for images and sound has not yet fulfilled this criterion, and it is only thanks to the pragmatism and innovation of the audiovisual archive – and often even thanks to chance – that older audiovisual records have even been preserved. On this subject, the authors of the study, which is not limited only to audiovisual records, remark: “New media are increasingly effective, compact and light but tend to be less resistant to the effects of aging.”⁴ With this they imply that in the area of traditional written information, digitisation causes problems that have been common to audiovisual records for a long time.

Worthiness of memorisation

³ See: ssdoo.gsfc.nasa.gov/nost/isoas/ref-model.html

⁴ Knoepfel, Olgati: National Memory Building Process, p.7

Probably the most difficult phase in the evolution of national memory is the decision on which information is to be preserved. For audiovisual information, we come up against various obstacles: image and sound recordings are often considered to be somewhere between art and record; the contents may fulfil the entire range between commercial entertainment and higher scientific relevance. Academics in art history, in media, information, and social sciences, historians, linguists and ethnologists are seldom in agreement on the significance of an audiovisual record. Producers such as radio and television broadcasters see the worthiness of memorisation in yet another completely different aspect: for them it is important to preserve images and sounds for later commercial use. This decidedly shows that audiovisual records, in comparison with written records, are in a relatively young category.

Actual memorisation in the form of storage

As in the OAIS model, in this phase the aim is not only to make the necessary storage capacities available, but also to offer the ability to administrate the stored materials. In this case the metadata play a decisive role.

Storing audiovisual records on conventional media such as magnetic tape or optical storage media is already no small task due to different climatic conditions necessary for the long-term preservation of every medium. In the digital age, this problem has become worse for two reasons: the long-term administration of the volume of data produced is full of unanswered questions, technically and as far as costs are concerned. The generation of the additionally necessary technical and contextual metadata can often not be carried out in times of reduced personnel resources, and then the information is untraceable.

Accessibility of stored data to the public.

Accessibility is the basic purpose of any archive. In the case of audiovisual records, we come up against two well-known problems: one is conservation-related and the other legal. Because playing sound and image recordings in many cases leads to the deterioration of the medium and often requires technical skills that average users do not possess, access copies must be created to protect the originals. Because this requires great expenditure of time and financial effort, many audiovisual records are not available to users. Although this problem has been slightly alleviated through digital technology, which makes it possible to make records available online in a suitable format, these new options have also mobilised the guardians of copyrights and have already resulted in many toughened copyright regulations.

Conclusion

Using the production process of the common good “national memory”, we have demonstrated the special problems that may be responsible for the fact that audiovisual records still do not have the status they deserve. This makes it possible to derive several priorities for action in the area of audiovisual archiving, nationally and internationally:

Memorability

The digitisation of records, whose lifespan is short or mid-term due to media decay or obsolescence, will not solve the problem of long-term preservation for good, but will move it to a technological area where the records have a much greater community of users. This should accelerate the search for sustainable solutions – although the audiovisual archives should make sure these solutions are adaptable to digitised images and sounds as well as their financial opportunities. Obsolescence may be compensated with the preservation of operational player technology, but in the long run this solution will not prevail.

Worthiness of memorisation

The ability to evaluate audiovisual records for long-term archiving will only improve if these materials are also used more often in scientific research, education and schooling. Therefore, the archives must actively promote the use of their collections by the above-mentioned target groups. In addition, preservation must be supported legally by matching archiving and legal deposit acts.

Actual memorisation in the form of storage

In addition to building up central storage infrastructures that are able to preserve, long-term, audiovisual records not only on various media but also in file format, a semiautomatic indexing technology must be developed so that the generation of metadata may keep up with digitisation.

Accessibility of stored data to the public

In this area, the copyright problem will probably be at the top of the agenda in the next few years. Only once it is possible to regulate the non-commercial use of records through copyright exceptions and limitations, will audiovisual information – but not only audiovisual information – be able to complete its important task as part of national memory.