

DIGITAL AUDIOVISUAL ARCHIVES: UNLOCKING OUR AUDIO AND AUDIOVISUAL HERITAGE POTENTIAL

Ilse Assmann
South African Broadcasting Media Libraries
E-mail: assmanni@sabc.co.za

Received: 19 May 2008
Revised: 15 January 2009
Accepted: 30 January 2009

Abstract

This article discusses the importance of digital sound and audiovisual archives in the broadcast environment. However, the digitisation of sound and audiovisual collections also impact on the non-broadcast environment. Digitising our AV collections has become critical. As such, we have entered an exciting phase in managing our assets – the new archiving. We need to embrace these opportunities to save our collections and need to respond enthusiastically to the changing broadcast environment. We need to overcome the inefficiency of analogue and already obsolete digital content management, and embrace the complexity of managing of data and objects in an unfragmented manner.

Keywords: Audiovisual Archives; digitisation; analogue; broadcast archives; media asset management

Introduction

What if we were never able to hear Nelson Mandela's historic speech from the dock recorded during the Rivonia Trial in 1963? You might say: So what? Why should we care?

I would like to quote the IASA President, Richard Green, when he adapted a quote by one of the most influential poets of the Renaissance period, John Donne, born in 1572 and died in 1631. In 1624 John Donne, as part of his Meditation XVII Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, wrote:¹

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Richard Green, President of IASA², adapted this quote to read:

No archive is an island, entire of itself, every archive is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if one sound or audiovisual recording is lost and is washed away, then we have all lost ... any such loss diminishes me, because I am involved in sound and audio-visual archives ...

Although John Donne never intended Archives and collections when he wrote the Meditation XVII, the quote depicts two essential ideas, which can be related to AV Archives and our collections:

- The ISLAND: not **isolated** from one another³
- The BELL: **mortality** (preservation)

If we would discuss these ideas in terms of our audiovisual collections, then we would understand that neither our collections nor ourselves can stand in isolation or survive forever. The bell is tolling right now for many parts of the world's AV heritage. No one is immune from the sound of the bell. If there is a solution to deterioration, in order to preserve our AV collections for generations to come, we will have to seek and realize it.

Furthermore, our collections are the memory of our institutions that will inform our children of our past and will be evidence of our decisions and actions, the same way paper documents and books have become evidential of our actions.

In 2007, PrestoSpace, a Cultural Heritage Integrated Project initiative in the EU made a strong plea for the digitisation of audiovisual archive content:

audiovisual archives are one of the richest heritages our culture has produced in the last century. Radio and television are the mirrors of the facts, the thought and the history of our civilisation in a way no other media has done before. However, this

heritage is one of the most hidden ones: media are present everyday and everywhere, but it is almost impossible for somebody to access any of the estimated *one hundred and fifty million hours* of audiovisual holdings that are deposited in archives, and other institutions, since the invention of sound and image recording. Most of this material is inaccessible, original and in great danger of disappearing in the next twenty years.⁴

This was almost the case with the Mandela speech during the Rivonia Trial. The court proceedings were recorded on a format then widely used in courts, the dictabelt, which has since become obsolete. Although the audio carrier, the dictabelt, still exists and is well looked after, no playback equipment is available in South Africa anymore. Thus, there is a huge collection of valuable historic recordings – all useless and silent. That was until the National Archives of South Africa granted the SABC permission in 1998 to extract the speech from the collection, and to have it restored and brought back to life by the British Library. The rest of the hearing is still inaccessible because of the complexity and high cost of such sound restoration. However, the complete collection was listed earlier this year in the UNESCO *Memory of the World* register and it is hoped that through alternative funding this collection will be restored.

It is due to the nature of audio and audiovisual collections that UNESCO⁵ took note and declared 27 October as:

“World Day for Audiovisual Heritage” to be celebrated annually ... to build global awareness of the various issues at stake in preserving the audiovisual heritage....Sound recordings and moving images in any form are vulnerable, and easily discarded or deliberately destroyed. Too much of the world’s 20th century audiovisual heritage is now lost, and much more is slipping beyond recovery because of neglect, natural decay and technological obsolescence. Unless public awareness of the importance of preservation is increased, this trend will continue.

UNESCO hopes to attract worldwide attention to audio and audiovisual collections, and the problems with preserving them and making them accessible to future generations.

Digital migration: what does it mean for us?

In simple terms it refers to the change we experienced when we 'migrated' from pen and paper to desktop computers. Desktops have become an integral part of our lives. Desktop tools are integrated across our workplaces and influence our workflows, with the added 'advantage' that the word 'archiving' has become the new buzz word to 'store' files and documents on our desktops or on servers, but mostly in an unorganised fashion. Despite this random archiving, it has enhanced sharing of information, accessibility and quick retrieval, to mention a few advantages.

The same is happening in the broadcast environment, where broadcast productions are becoming digital, forcing libraries and archives to follow suit. The demand on us to capture digitally-generated content automatically is growing, and this will force us to manage our collections from an asset-centric point of view. This is fundamentally different from the way our collections were viewed previously, when collections were mainly seen as overheads. To make sure that we stay in line with these developments, we need to plan strategically how to migrate our analogue (and even some of our digital archive collections) to an online central storage facility, from where we will deliver over a broadcast network. It is up to us to take advantage of this development.

Digital migration has opened doors to exciting initiatives that never existed before: we can stream Audio and Audiovisual material as part of service delivery and information sharing to introduce our archive content; websites offer a new platform to introduce our collections to the world; and, in addition, we will be able to reach more people and create an even bigger awareness of the value of our collections and content by utilising the growing range of content delivery mechanisms, including mobile phones.

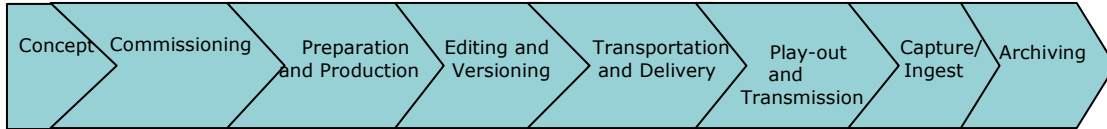
Despite the exiting opportunities, it is important to understand that digital migration or transfer of our collections is no longer optional – it has become essential, and in some instances urgent. If we are serious about preservation, we have to avoid situations such as the dictabelt collection I mentioned earlier. Playback equipment is

becoming obsolete at an alarming rate. The reasons for obsolescence are:

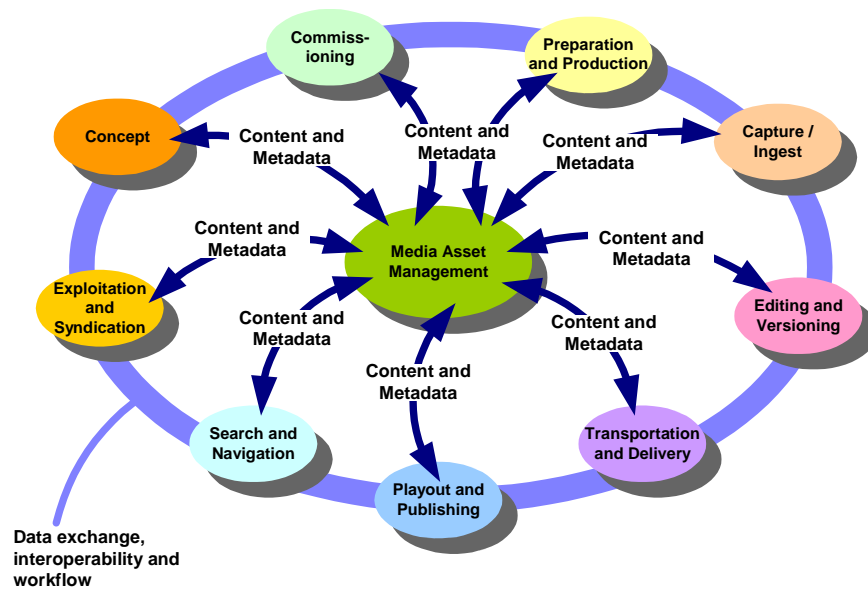
- Product: decreasing quality due to deterioration, decay, decomposition;
- Commercially: dwindling profits due to the product's end of life cycle;
- Manufacturer: follow-up product due to improvements;
- Progress: new developments, new technologies;
- Consumer: no longer demand market: competitors have a better/cheaper product;
- Economy/politics: product no longer wanted; and
- *Force majeure*: wars, catastrophes, etc.

It would be wrong to assume it is only analogue formats that are impacted on by obsolescence. Recent digital formats such as the minidisk are no longer manufactured and as such, minidisk collections have become critical to preserve. The convergence of broadcast media and computer technologies impact critically on preservation strategies, and the ever-increasing range of distribution channels and platforms allows for interactive possibilities that never existed before. In addition, the production, distribution and maintenance of new content is becoming less expensive, whereas our analogue collections are becoming extremely costly to maintain. Analogue collections have complicated access, being so tedious and time-consuming.

The current workflows in broadcasting still portray Radio and Television programmes as distinct, but with a variety of programmes and content created for both services such as News, Sport, additional content etc. There is nothing wrong with this. However, the content is produced by different departments using different systems likely to duplicate metadata and content; more often than not the systems cannot link and/or the content is captured and managed locally and sometimes differently by the various departments. Also, until now our workflows were linear as the asset lifecycle was influenced by the fact that content was stored on a physical carrier. The result was the development of a linear, sequential life cycle with processes supported by separate "stand alone" systems. Distribution of content was thus based on a "push" model with archiving as an "end of pipe" process.⁶



But with the digital revolution, new opportunities sprang to life which impacted on this lifecycle: the asset lifecycle will increasingly rely on computer-based systems with the advantage of existing content that may be re-purposed, re-formatted and re-packaged to enhance new productions or to save costs by rebroadcasts. For us to maintain the edge in the midst of these new opportunities, we will have to look at new means of sorting, retrieving and selecting content worth keeping, and providing easy access to that content. The future life cycle model that will meet broadcasters' requirements places media assets (formerly the archive) at the centre of a non-sequential lifecycle.⁷



For us as broadcasters, it means that content can be made available, any time, anywhere, in any format. Broadcast business processes and workflows will be developed around a central repository with content distribution being based on "push and pull" models. Media Asset Management will move to the core of the cycle, replacing traditional archiving.

We have entered an exciting phase in managing assets – the new archiving. We need to embrace these opportunities to save our collections and need to respond enthusiastically to the changing

broadcast environment. We need to overcome the inefficiency of analogue and already obsolete digital content management, and embrace the complexity of managing of data and objects in an unfragmented manner.

Conclusion

If we as broadcasting organisations understand that our archive 'stocks' have become valuable programme assets, then we have started to travel the road towards also being content providers. Broadcasters understanding the media environment evolve into being content *providers*. Electronic media platforms operators understand the importance of having access to content of value.

Archives will emerge from their current isolated and traditional position at the end of the production chain to being recognised as the central point of existing and new content streams towards being a service provider, in a central content hub, and a service provider in an integral part of a networked production environment.

The archive community need one another more than ever before and as we are drawn from our isolation in our companies, we are also drawn from our isolation with regard to one another. We need to exchange ideas, knowledge and skills, and we need to share our fears, insecurities and successes. We need to ensure that our African heritage, which mainly exists in the form of oral narratives, is recorded and preserved for future generations and use.

References

- Done, J. 2007. Mediation XVII: Text and Annotation <http://isu.indstate.edu/ilnprof/ENG451/ISLAND/text.html> (Accessed 11 August 2008).
- PrestoSpace Steering Board: BBC, Ina, RAI, BandG, ORF, University of Sheffield, Joanneum Research http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/digital_libraries/doc/replies_online_consultation/replies/prestospace_a303082.pdf (Accessed October 2007).

UNESCO Worldday for Audiovisual Heritage [Online]. Available WWW: <http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php> (Accessed October 2007).

Endnotes

1. [Online]. Available WWW: <http://isu.indstate.edu/ilnprof/ENG451/ISLAND/text.html> (Accessed October 2007).
2. International Association for Sound and Audiovisual Archivists. Richard Green is Acting Director for the Music Division at the Canadian Library and Archives and currently serves as President for IASA.
3. [Online]. Available WWW: <http://isu.indstate.edu/ilnprof/ENG451/ISLAND/text.html> (Accessed October 2008).
4. PrestoSpace Steering Board: BBC, Ina, RAI, BandG, ORF, University of Sheffield, Joanneum Research. [Online]. Available WWW: http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/digital_libraries/doc/replies_online_consultation/replies/prestospace_a303082.pdf (Accessed October 2007).
5. [Online]. Available WWW: <http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php> (Accessed October 2007).
6. Unknown. Used in SABC documentation to described linear life cycle.
7. Unknown. Used in SABC documentation to described future life cycle.