UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF AUDIOVISUAL ARCHIVING IN AFRICA AND THE DEVELOPING WORLD: CHALLENGES FOR THE ARCHIVE LAGGING BEHIND

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Abstract

The division between the two worlds (the developed and the developing world) has not spared the process of audiovisual archiving and the gap is widening bringing in a lot of challenges to Africa as part of the developing world. While the developed world is today concerned about digital technology and web-based information management, which has taken the world by storm, Africa still has to define basic principles as well as putting up structures for audiovisual archiving. In the developed world, the cultural value of the audiovisual media gained legitimacy and widening acceptance after World War II, and this is what Africa still requires. There are a lot of problems in Africa, and because of this, activities such as preservation of a historical record, especially in the audiovisual media are seen as a luxury or a part-time endeavour. Yet time is moving and history making does not stop or wait for things to be alright for it to be made and preserved. Hence, it is important that these issues are talked about since we are already lagging behind. The article looks at the issues of understanding the basic principles that need to be acquired for any effective audiovisual archiving process; the philosophies entailed with it; as well as the ethics and basic appreciation of these, together with individual and institutional commitment.

Introduction

Audiovisual materials are much more difficult to preserve than paper documents. The cost of preserving is in the long term so large that the necessary resources are usually difficult to raise. As a result, not many collecting institutions, even in the developed world, are capable of undertaking full-scale preservation activities. In answer to the question posed by Schneider (1991:2) in his paper: "Film preservation: whose responsibility should it be?", most of us agree that some regular preservation effort needs to take place. Schneider raises issues about the need to act even in the face of limited resources lest we lose valuable sources of information. The fact is, audiovisual materials are too fragile to waste time hoping that the environment will one day become conducive enough to begin proper audiovisual archiving activities. It is important that collecting institutions in Africa properly define collection development guidelines in order to ensure that vital information contained in audiovisual materials is identified, acquired and preserved before it is too late. Selection judgments are best based on written policies, which reflect the archive's mandate and role in society, so that there is a clear reference point. This will also ensure that all that deserves to be preserved is guaranteed of long-term preservation. There is also a need to put proper preservation guidelines in place to ensure that material already in the collection is preserved for long-term periods.

Major problems facing Africa – *Oh God, this is too much to handle*!

Among the problems bedeviling Africa and the developing world are: lack of formal institutional guidelines and policies regarding collection development, collection management, preservation and the provision of access; lack of equipment and infrastructure; lack of technical skills and knowledge; lack of government support, and above all, lack of an overall appreciation of the contribution of audiovisual materials as vital sources of a cultural heritage of any society. On top of this, the culture of putting value to audiovisual materials as potential sources of information, and an appreciation of the ethics of the handling of this media are generally lacking, hence the problem of lagging behind. However, with individual and institutional commitment, it is possible to forge ahead and manage with limited resources.

Suggested path to take under these circumstances – *Without resources, there is nothing we can do!*

Logically, the first step for any collecting institution is to put up structures such as policies, written guidelines and infrastructure which are the back-bone of collection development and management. But for any institution to be able to carry out these activities, it needs an overall understanding and appreciation of the fundamentals of audiovisual archiving by all stakeholders: staff, management, policy makers, and above all, governments. There is a strong and urgent need to develop an across-the-board culture of understanding and appreciating of these philosophical issues in Africa and the developing world in order to catch up with the modern trends. Once this culture is implanted at all levels, it will be easier for collecting institutions to carry out archiving activities, with government support, management support, and above all, a staff guided by principles and ethics that promote the survival of, and long-term preservation of a cultural heritage held in audiovisual materials. With this level of understanding and appreciation, even with the drawback of lack of resources, the battle will be fought on a much better front.

Audiovisual materials contain irreplaceable documents of unique historical and cultural content. They are an indispensable prerequisite for the representation of the world heritage and all its multicultural aspects. Governments, policy makers and archivists in Africa and the developing world need to subscribe to the values that the overall aim of audiovisual archiving is for the survival and availability of this unique heritage and that it is their responsibility to ensure the survival of this very important aspect of life.

Nature of audiovisuals – *It is a choice between keeping and losing!*

It is vital that these stakeholders develop a sense of mission and urgency because of a range of factors: the fragility and fugitive nature of audiovisual media; the general lack of resources (more so because of the high expense of this media); and the rapid development and change of technology. The developing world is not just seen lagging behind, but also tends to take a casual stance when it comes to the audiovisual media. Yet, because of the factors mentioned above, one cannot afford to take a laid-back stance. Audiovisual materials are too

fragile and suffer from rapid technological change and development so much that their preservation should not be shelved for the future. Collections require constant, in-depth management and maintenance if they are to maximize their useful life. Audiovisual carriers ultimately depend on deliberate institutional action to ensure their survival. The rate of deterioration for most them can be slowed down markedly through appropriate storage and preservation considerations. It is the speed of loss or self-destruction, which makes it more urgent in audiovisual materials than in other archival or library material. Hence, archivists and governments in the developing world urgently need to appreciate these fundamental aspects of audiovisual carriers and accept that they cannot afford to continue to lag behind. They need to act quickly in order to save their heritage from possible extinction. Audiovisual collections cannot reasonably be expected to survive by simply "lying around" or being put on a shelf: even if left alone, they will degrade and ultimately self-destruct (Edmondson 1998).

Harsh environment – *Excuse me, the clock is ticking, and history is in the making!*

It is understood that Africa and the developing world continue to suffer from a host of problems (political and economic), which makes it very difficult to take up rigorous and effective audiovisual archiving activities. Admittedly, the operating environment is not conducive enough to encourage or promote active programmes. But, unfortu-nately, the making of history does not stop neither does it wait for the availability of resources, or political and economic stability; neither does it take a casual nor backward stance. It is said that our task as archivists is not to rewrite the past but to preserve it, and the question is, should we, in Africa and the developing world, let history be lost while we are hopelessly watching? Archivists, both in the developed and developing world, have a responsibility both to the past and to the future. The need for this does not discriminate, and this is a fact to be borne with by all archivists. How can the developing world preserve the past when it faces severe blows from format progression and technological obsolescence is the big question? Archivists in Africa need to formulate strategies that are workable in their situation of limited resources. The responsibility and mandate is upon us to do something.

Format progression – *Do something Africa, it may not be a choice but the only option if you want your memory to survive!*

Audiovisual media are exposed to the effects of format progression, since they are recorded and reproduced through technological devices, and a fact to be borne with is that as technology changes, the archive is often required to maintain the material in the obsolete format, otherwise it will eventually become unplayable format and therefore lost, no matter how stable the carriers are. The developed world is right now battling with changing formats, especially with digital technology, which also has its own challenges, but offers acceptable solutions. Old formats are being transferred to new technology (but without being insensitive to losing or changing content/ picture/sound quality). On the other hand, Africa and the developing world are still struggling to come to terms with growing collections of gramophone vinyl records, videos, and audiotape cassettes, both analog and digital, whose commercial life has either ended or has been surpassed by other technologies.

Keeping old formats is acceptable as long as access and use are guaranteed. However, this is often not possible and the requirement to change to new formats is in most cases inevitable. However, the point here is that the developing world is not excluded from this world problem. The problem is even worse here than anywhere else and this calls for more urgency in addressing these issues. Archivists and governments in the developing world need to ensure the permanent survival of the audiovisual heritage now or else they will be blamed by generations to come. The nature of audiovisual carriers requires that as soon as practicable, they be brought under housekeeping, and regular monitoring. For this reason, Africa and the developing world cannot afford to lag behind. Fleischauer (2003) acknowledged that even big institutions such as the Library of Congress have traditionally been "tilted towards analog (until recently) and generally media dependent". He identifies the biggest challenge as that of device and media obsolescence.

Ethics – *Hey Archivist, you are endangering the collection!*

Archivists need to develop a culture of appreciating the ethics in the handling of audiovisual carriers. Through the provision of access or copying or viewing services, audiovisual materials are constantly subjected to many risks, some of which could be avoided if the archivist handling the material has a general understanding of the ethics of handling this very fragile media. The access that we give should not put any work at risk for the sake of meeting short-term access needs. Archivists should take a long-term view of their role. The motive of any archive should be preservation in the interests of permanent access, not exploitation with no thought of tomorrow. Are we thinking of tomorrow in the developing world when we give access? The skills and knowledge required in providing access are also of considerable range: entrepreneurial skills, knowledge of the collection, technical skills, product development skills, legal knowledge, presentational skills etc. An audiovisual archivist needs to have a technical perspective, and a technological mindset; the capacity to think in technical terms, to operate a variety of technical equipment; to understand the direct consequences for collection material of inappropriate storage, mishandling or misuse of equipment. Collecting institutions in Africa and the developing world need to put more emphasis on this technical aspect of the audiovisual archivist through training and exposure to technical skills. They need to realize and accept the fact that there is more to the archivist working with the audiovisual media than any other archivist or librarian due to the technical nature of audiovisuals. This, together with an overall appreciation and understanding of the ethics of handling audiovisual collections is very crucial to the process of audiovisual archiving.

Managing with limited resources – *We have nothing, there is nothing we can do!*

Remedial measures such as copying or repair help extend the life of collection items. However, given the limitations in resources that will always exist, preventive measures such as proper storage, become a very attractive and effective alternative. Audiovisual preservation in most cases is not a one-time operation but an ongoing process. Admittedly though, audiovisual collections require specialized know-

ledge and expertise, and by comparison, as Stefano (2003:18) emphasizes, the scale of resources needed to achieve meaningful programming efforts to preserve them is far greater than the resources libraries have assembled for traditional paper-based preservation. However, the following measures may be attempted, though they do not completely solve the problems completely:

- Selecting material at most risk. The items selected will be stored in a small controlled storage area.
- Prioritizing work for preservation. The Irish Film Archive (O'Connell 2002), in particular, puts emphasis and consideration on the value and vulnerability of collection items when prioritizing work for preservation in the face of the expensive nature of audiovisuals as well as budget constraints.
- Periodic rewinding of tapes. This is relatively cheaper; all that is needed is playback equipment. It will lengthen the lifespan of tapes by eliminating the effects of 'sticky tape' caused by hydrolysis due to high humidity levels.
- Making duplicate copies e.g. VHS is relatively affordable, and films could be copied onto VHS for access. This will help preserve the original/master copy. It is important to note, however, that the use of VHS in most countries in Africa is quickly going down, but can still be an option for those institutions which are still far from more current solutions such as digital technology.
- Simple format progression: audiotape to CD using CD-writer. CD-writers are now available in most countries, even in Africa. Audio-tapes do not last very long, and transferring the content to CD ensures the survival of information contained in audiotapes.
- Digitization of analogue material. Despite the cost factor, digitization is currently used to ensure continued access to audiovisual material previously in analogue format. However, it has not been proven to offer a lasting solution, as digital copies are known to last just a few years.

Notably, back in 1996, Dietrich Schuller presented a very practical recommendation on some measures, which can be undertaken in the face of limited resources to lengthen the lifespan of audiovisual collections in the analogue format. Below are some of his recommendations which can still apply today (Schuller 1996):

- Thermal insulation of buildings and rooms housing audiovisual items. This helps maintain constant temperatures even if the weather outside changes drastically.
- Storage areas should be placed in the centre of the building, and their walls should not touch the outside of the house.
- Avoid sunlight hitting and directly heating the outside surfaces of the archival building.
- Dust management. Taking dust proofing measures such as wrapping carriers individually in polyethylene bags; tightening window seals to ensure a good seal; installing air locks at all entrances; and having air-conditioners that are equipped with effective dust filters which must be regularly maintained.
- Use of an underground storage area may in principle help to reduce energy costs. (However, it should be noted that this increases the risk of flooding.)

MasterDigital[1] is an American corporation, which, among its various services also offers practical guidelines on how to preserve analogue tape, acetate tape, polyester tape, and cassette tape. The organization covers areas such as handling, storage, packaging and containers.

Digital challenge – *the beauty of it, and the beast in it for Africa!*

The sad reality, as shown in all the points above, is that Africa was still battling to come to terms with the analogue format, when the digital era arrived. The old formats still needed to be preserved and taken care of, having been found mostly in 'dumping' storages, with no one particularly paying attention to them. The effort now was to move very old formats to relatively new ones such as VHS for easy access through VCR's or a simple radio for audiocassettes and CD players. Unfortunately, because of digital technology, most of these are no longer being fully supported by the market. It is very difficult today, for instance, for an institution to purchase a film projector, let alone service the projectors already in existence. The Zimbabwe National Archives holds very large projection equipment and telecine machinery acquired in the 1990's which was very useful, and would still be very useful to provide access to the several thousand 16mm and 35mm films in the collection dating from the 1950's to 1990's.

Unfortunately, the equipment is lying idle today, and efforts to have it serviced locally and outside were strained by either lack of technical skills or funds. Thus, the collection, rich as it is, is not being fully used. The story is the same for the ten thousand gramophone (vinyl) records held by the institution which is probably the largest collection of old Zimbabwean music.

The beauty of digitization is that content can be transferred and accessed easily with digital technology. The beast that comes along with digitization is the bill attached to it. It is very expensive to digitize just a single film reel. However, under these circumstances of high costs, institutions are encouraged to prioritise collection items that are more valuable and at most risk because it is generally not economically feasible for an archives to digitise its entire collection. Institutions can start with small digitization projects to gain expertise and more understanding of the technology. Meanwhile, they can continue to improve on storage facilities of the old formats to reduce the rate of deterioration. Some institutions even opt for freezing of film (but caution and expert advice should be taken to control both temperature and humidity while in frozen state).

However, institutions in the developing world are encouraged to take action, however small. It is better to do something small, and to pay a little attention rather than wait for situations to be comfortable because most likely this will never be. Even the developed world is also facing these problems of lack of enough resources and the fast-changing technologies. Digitization itself is also a problem because it has not been proved to offer long-term preservation, but it offers opportunity for continuity for archival institutions. Myenza (2009) advocated small digital projects using open source software, which she says can be a small but effective step in preserving and providing access to Africa's memory.

Conclusion – *Africa, do something: small leads to BIG*!

The long-term success of audiovisual archiving in Africa and the developing world, under these circumstances, depends upon building greater public and political awareness of, not just the realities of audiovisual survival, but also, equally, loss. There is a need to successfully communicate these realities of audiovisual carriers. The

developing world needs to adopt positive corporate cultures whereby the archivists need to convince, change attitudes, and mould their operating environments. They also need to adopt a passionate advocacy for this field as well as a sensitive approach to ethics, which is very essential in this field. It is this commitment that Africa and the developing world desperately needs in order to formulate effective strategies that work within the physical constraints and threats that they face. The commitment is required from all stakeholders: archivists, institutions, management, governments, politicians and producers. On top of this, there is an urgent need for a general understanding and appreciation of the basics and fundamentals of audiovisual archiving philosophies and ethics in order to effectively tackle the challenges of audiovisual archiving for the archives that are already lagging behind. We are all bound by our profession as archivists to ensure the survival of an historical heritage. The onus is on us archivists in Africa to put our profession to the fore so that we do not remain lagging behind. The digital era is a reality which we have to embrace even with its own obstacles. To conclude this article, Miller (2004) summarized this dilemma that we all face when he wrote: "Audio archives owe their existence to those librarians and archivists whose vision of the future embraces both the technology of the present and the future and the history of the past". Let us not watch while our collections suffer from obsolescence of equipment and high costs of digitization. For one to be big, you need to start small.

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Endnotes

1. For guidelines on how to preserve analogue tapes, acetate tapes, polyester tapes, and cassette tapes, See Master Digital on http://www.masterdigital.com/index.htm (Accessed 2 August 2009).