

Preserving the Audio Memory of the World

Joie Springer

From the earliest times, humanity has sought viable and lasting means to transmit its legacy of wisdom and ideas. From ballads to myths, from engravings on stone, to parchment or the printed page, recordings on analogue or digital magnetic audio media, each succeeding generation has tried to find an enduring format that would preserve memory while making it easily accessible. Memory is the sum of the wisdom and experiences passed on from one generation to the next, that help to build the future, avoid the mistakes of the past thus eliminating the need to repeat the same learning cycle.

The ballads and songs of old helped to pass on the message in an enjoyable but effective fashion, but ran the risk of being altered due to memory lapses, creative embellishments, or even dying with the custodian in instances where there was not enough time to fully train a successor. The invention of the alphabet and musical notations in some societies were important developments that guaranteed the legacy of a more reliable version of memory. Wisdom could now be preserved and accessed by a trained user but, more importantly, could be transmitted intact.

With the birth of the written record, came the creation of the first libraries and archives as storehouses of the documentary heritage of the world. Yet, all too quickly, mankind realized that the written record was as endangered as the oral one. Ancient libraries and collections were destroyed by human negligence, natural catastrophes or wanton destruction: a problem that persists up to today.

In addition to these natural and man-made catastrophes, a high proportion of all documents ever created has disappeared due to chemical instability. Although all recordings are affected by chemical factors that contribute to their decay, audiovisual records are particularly vulnerable. An audiovisual recording is doomed from the day it is made and the process of decay cannot be stopped; we can only alter the speed at which it disappears.

Along with chemical deterioration, technological obsolescence of audiovisual carriers is also a primary cause of concern. While technological developments have resulted in improvements in the machines or carriers used to access audiovisual recordings, we are all too familiar with the number of audiovisual formats, even those of recent years, which are now obsolete or obsolescent. Compared to the printed page which has not changed significantly since the invention of the printing press and which can be directly read by anyone without visual impairment, audiovisual documents need machines to be accessed. With new formats constantly being developed, archives are required either to keep a stock of machines -and spare parts- for every type of recording or must transfer information to a different carrier with a resultant loss in quality in analogue formats.

This, of necessity, places a high burden on those entrusted with the task of preserving the memory of their times and adds a complexity to the work of an audiovisual archive far beyond that realized by the public. To fulfil its role effectively, different processes involving copying, transfer to new formats, cultural promotion and so on, have to be undertaken, tasks which the rest of the world is unaware of.

Other major problems relate to the lack of legislation or a legal framework for the safeguarding of the audiovisual heritage. Although many governments are aware of the need for action, the number of developing countries with specific legislation for the protection of its audiovisual heritage is surprisingly low. This situation is made worse by inadequately trained staff who may not be aware of the issues at stake, or, perhaps even worse, whose lack of skills actually endanger the preservation of the documents in their care as they attempt restoration and conservation work.

To cope with the very limited budgets usually at their disposal, archives are often selective in choosing what to preserve and disseminate. This, consequently, calls into question the issue of universal access to the cultural heritage. Selection depreciates that which has not been retained and leads to the loss of the global audiovisual memory.

In order to make governments aware of the need to approve wide-ranging measures to safeguard the audiovisual heritage, in 1980, UNESCO's General Conference adopted the "**Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images**". This Recommendation laid the foundation for the Organization's action in this field and its principles include the need to take measures to "prevent the loss, unwarranted disappearance or deterioration of **any** item of the national production" through appropriate measures to ensure that the heritage is afforded adequate physical protection and handed down in its entirety to future generations. Although how much of this content can be preserved is subject to debate. While most archivists agree that everything should be preserved, practical factors determine otherwise.

The Recommendation is the foundation of UNESCO's *Audiovisual Programme*. By sensitizing the general public and governments to the necessity to safeguard their heritage, UNESCO also supports the efforts of professional organizations involved in this task. It has contributed to activities such the development of technical standards and training of specialists as well as the organization of technical meetings such as the *JTS Paris 2000* in cooperation with professional bodies and is actively involved in the preparations for *JTS 2004*, tentatively scheduled for Toronto next year. It has served as a discussion forum for interest groups. This includes the 1995 meeting between manufacturers and sound archivists to discuss the phased discontinuation of analogue machines that would enable a programmed transfer of existing analogue audio material. This was followed up by a similar consultation in 2002 on the role of magnetic tape and recordable compact discs (CD-Rs) in the safeguarding of the cultural and intellectual heritage of the world. The worldwide stock of audio and videotapes in archival custody, estimated to be about 200 million hours, is in danger of disappearing due to the instability of storage media and it is essential to formulate a strategy for preservation to permit a phased transfer of these endangered materials. UNESCO has also commissioned the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) to undertake an international survey of endangered audiovisual carriers in order to determine overall preservation needs and develop resource planning and migration priorities.

Audiovisual recordings are one form of communication whose impact is immediate and are ideal in promoting local mores and culture. It is imperative that they be preserved and disseminated to good effect through appropriate infrastructure and legislation. In many African countries in particular, radio is the only universal means of reaching all populations. Conversely, this region is the one which suffers most from an ever-increasing loss of its audio heritage perhaps even more than the written word as several countries do have national archives for print records but few have audiovisual archives. The records of independence and

other historic events are crumbling into dust and this region is on the verge of collective amnesia about much of its past.

These efforts to preserve the audiovisual heritage are also an integral part of the **Memory of the World Programme** which UNESCO established in 1992 to safeguard **all** aspects of the documentary heritage. Through its complementary twin goals of preservation and access, the Programme seeks to make the documentary heritage of humanity as widely available as possible. Through this programme, UNESCO is creating a methodology to strengthen knowledge of the world's cultural heritage while respecting the ethical, legal and other issues relating to universal access. It serves as a model to encourage all members of society to preserve the right to memory for future generations.

The Organization is also in the process of creating a **Knowledge Portal** where access to the knowledge of the world in its various languages and local content will be assured. Three thematic portals have already been initiated. The *Archives, Libraries and Heritage Portals* are gateways to resources related to information management, heritage collections in the broadest sense and to international co-operation in these fields. They are being developed as focal points or the concentration of experiences, for both specialists and the public.

A new and growing area of concern is the safeguard of the digital heritage. Much of world's cultural, educational and scientific information is increasingly being produced, distributed and accessed in digital form. However, digital information is also vulnerable, affected as it is by both technical obsolescence of carriers and physical decomposition. At the same time, the switch to Internet-based information increases the impermanence of memory. Many sites disappear without leaving a record of their existence and others, such as news providers, change their content constantly. It may be true to say that the digital heritage is perhaps more endangered than other types of heritage. This is a source of alarm for UNESCO where many countries are switching to digital media as they believe this to be the answer for the long-term preservation of their endangered analogue heritage.

Digitization raises fundamental questions with no easy answers. It allows the separation of content from its medium and further permits it to be reutilized or recombined at will. This opens up a new domain where issues related to integrity, identification, storage, migration and preservation of information will need to be examined.

Digital content creation, along with its preservation and access, is influencing the work ethic of the audiovisual archivist and is revolutionizing both archival practices and the profession. The digital environment is changing old habits. In many ways, the move to a digital environment mirrors the introduction of sound films or the switch from nitrate to safety film and the consequent loss of the film heritage as some custodians no longer see the need to preserve the old formats. While information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer greater perspectives for access to information, audiovisual archivists need to examine how best to utilize ICT state-of-the-art developments. The very concept of archiving and institutional boundaries is being called into question. As technologies develop, audiovisual archivists will be required to develop new skills to fulfill their role in a different environment.

The public service mission of libraries and archives in the digital age therefore clearly needs to be re-evaluated and redefined, so that their core functions of disseminating information for education, research and cultural diversity are preserved in order to complement, rather than compete with, services offered by commercial providers. In this way, state or national

institutions can expand their role as universal resources, providing access to information for all and not just a select few. On the positive side, broader access to all types of information will be facilitated and will serve the goal of making information available to all.

Recognition of the challenges posed by the preservation of the digital heritage has led the Organization to launch an initiative to create a ***Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage*** whose main objectives are to raise awareness of the digital dimension of the cultural heritage, to ensure that preservation of digital heritage is given high priority at policy levels and to facilitate access to information on digital heritage. The Charter is expected to be adopted by UNESCO's General Conference in October 2003. The Charter is being prepared along with *Guidelines for the Preservation of Digital Heritage*. The Guidelines were published electronically in March 2003 and are soon expected to appear in print. They are intended for policy makers, managers and technical practitioners. They examine the digital heritage as a common heritage; define measures to ensure its protection against loss; propose strategies and policies to be developed, as well as partnerships and responsibilities.

UNESCO will continue to support initiatives creating institutional infrastructure and legislation for the preservation of the audiovisual recorded heritage, as well as all types of heritage, yet it is fully aware of the immense task and encourages other measures to obtain this goal.

COLLEAGUES

A major issue confronting us, is the development of the information society and the globalization of information. UNESCO firmly believes that universal access to information is a basic human right and in certain parts of the world, this has been achieved since anyone can access copies of a recorded work anywhere and at any time. But the information available is usually that of societies that have the means to promote and preserve their own identity and culture. This leads to a distorted vision of the world.

In developing the global society, it is therefore of vital and strategic importance to recognize and promote access to cultural and informational products as a means of reaffirming cultural identity and diversity. In this respect, greater attention must be given to the development of content which reflects local culture, values, history and language.

Cooperation of all is essential to build a global civil society that, contrary to existing norms, will reflect the concerns and interests of all people, and not those of the powerful few whose special interests often rule supreme to the detriment of others. Coverage of the war in Iraq was globally televised, often around the clock, but the basic depiction of the crisis depended, to a large extent, on the policies of each station and the position it wished to convey. In years to come, the public record of events such as these will be the archives of the television and radio stations. How objective will it be, if what is available is the mere mouthpiece of the convictions of the proprietors. The very instruments of democracy can be used to subvert the process itself!

There is therefore rightly a growing imperative for the global society to take urgent measures to ensure that global concerns move beyond self-interest and that there is a greater concerted effort among governments and international- and non-governmental organizations.

As the representative of voices looking to build "globalization with a human face", UNESCO is at the forefront of measures to present an alternative with a human dimension to the interests which have commercial clout. Its ability to be a facilitator is one factor that allows it to be the forum for the views of its partners and their subsequent transformation into policy recommendations to be taken into account at the *World Summit on the Information Society*, being organized in December of this year by the International Telecommunications Union in cooperation with other international agencies including UNESCO. The Summit is a prime opportunity for all governments to formulate policy recommendations that profoundly affect the way the Information Society develops in future.

UNESCO has a **unique** role within the United Nations. It is the sole Organization within the UN system with an intergovernmental programme devoted to the development of the information society. The Organization is therefore relying on its network of professional organizations and institutions, representing all sectors of civil society, to prepare a plan for adoption that will establish standards and policy decisions ensuring universal access to information while promoting alternatives to commercial interests. It is associating all key players in its action to build an information society that will narrow the divide between the information rich and the information poor, and in this connection, has organized a series of regional consultations allowing the voice of specific stakeholders and interest groups to be heard.

Through its *Information for All Programme*, the Organization seeks to "provide a platform for international policy discussions and guidelines for action on preservation of information and universal access to it" as well as the "participation of all in the emerging global information society and facilitating debate on the ethical, legal and societal consequences of ICT developments". It believes that effective participation of all in the Information Society can only be achieved through the ability to communicate in one's language and to be fully aware of one's cultural past. By preserving the heritage of a nation and facilitating access to it, all peoples can be assured of maintaining their own distinct cultural identity.

These briefly, are some of the main areas in which UNESCO is actively pursuing the goals of its Constitution which recognizes that access to information is a basic human right but access can only be assured if the records are properly preserved.

As UNESCO seeks to improve access to global memory, human memory itself seems to be fading. Research has shown that, at a time when mechanical memory is increasing at an exceptional rate, the ability to recall history and even current events is on the decline. This is not a new phenomenon. From the human repositories of the past whose memory stored society's wisdom to the electronic databases of the present, humanity tends to rely on others to keep its past.

This is in part what has driven the evolution of society. The ability to draw on external sources instead of relying exclusively on one's own experiences or those of one's immediate connections has provided the impetus to the transformation of society and the progress it has achieved. But as we have seen, despite the need to have recorded documents for the preservation of memory, in many developing countries, oral communication remains the most common means of transmitting ideas and there is consequently an urgent need for institutions to preserve their audio and oral heritage.

The audiovisual heritage is endangered! In an attempt to raise awareness of what is at stake, UNESCO published a report highlighting the losses of documentary heritage in the twentieth

century. Since then, much more has been lost and archivists need to become more proactive in their fight. We work with radio and television as a part of our daily lives yet we do not use the same media to launch global campaigns to raise awareness of the potential loss of the world's heritage. Although the archive is considered the unglamorous part of the studio, without it, no station can fully survive. It is therefore up to us to insist that the more visible side of radio and television stations that broadcast features which are considered worthy of safeguard also present the dangers to launch a groundswell of support for the work of the archives. For far too long have archivists been modestly doing their job, making tremendous sacrifices to ensure that collections are preserved. It is time to show the world that an archive is not a dusty room full of old junk, but storehouses of treasures that keep our memory alive!

Gracias