Working for Audiovisual Preservation in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Training is at the heart of the European TAPE project. The project is directed at cultural and research institutions that (also) hold audiovisual materials, as a minority collection in what are usually largely paper-based holdings. TAPE's training programme includes European workshops (in English) as well as national/regional events (in national languages). Since the start of the project already ten workshops took place, and more will follow.

ABOUT TAPE

TAPE (Training for Audiovisual Preservation in Europe) is a 3-year project that aims to contribute to the preservation of the audiovisual heritage in Europe through raising awareness and training by expert meetings, research, publications and workshops. It is supported by the Culture 2000 programme of the European Union. The European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA) coordinates the project that began on 1 September 2004.

TAPE explores the requirements for continued access to audiovisual materials and the application of new technologies for opening up audiovisual collections that provide living documentation of the world of the 20th century. Most audiovisual materials are held by the major national institutions with specific responsibilities for audiovisual heritage. These dedicated film and sound archives, deposit libraries and broadcasting companies all have vast archives, and several European projects for the cinematographic heritage and broadcasting materials have been set up over the years, such as BRAVA and FIRST (for film), and PRESTO and its successor PRESTO-Space.[1] However, outside these specialized organizations there are many archives, libraries and institutes that also hold sound and moving image. There are large music libraries and regional and municipal archives with material of local interest. Cultural and research institutes hold the most diverse recordings, created or collected for, e.g., anthropological and linguistic research, oral history projects, or documentation of specific subject fields.

All audiovisual material is at risk of being lost through media decay and evolving technology which forces playback equipment out of use. Older mechanical carriers like instantaneous disks are by now mostly seriously threatened, and magnetic tape for instance is a fragile medium with a life span of decades. Moreover, magnetic tape exists in many formats and the information it contains becomes inaccessible when the equipment is no longer available. Nonspecialist organizations often lack the resources to keep material under optimal conditions and because the audiovisual collection is only a small part of their total holdings, they only have limited in-house expertise on management of these materials. Digitisation would enhance the chances of survival of the information recorded, but not everyone has knowledge on how to convert their analogue holdings. Opportunities for continued training of nonspecialist professionals in this area are few and far between.

TAPE started with a study on the present situation of audiovisual collections in Europe that confirms this picture. The results show that many institutions hold small collections, and many lack the basic requirements for effective preservation. A substantial number do not have climate control and most do not have a preservation policy for audiovisual materials. Neither do they have trained staff, and the need for more training opportunities is strongly felt.

TRAINING PROGRAMME

In February 2005 TAPE brought together specialists in the audiovisual field who have experience as trainers. They met in Rome for a 2-day seminar to discuss audiovisual training on European and national level, teaching materials and models for training courses. The results were used as input for the training activities.

Three European workshops that focus on collection management and that are taught in English are part of the TAPE programme. Two of these workshops were held in Amsterdam in September 2005 and April 2006, the third and final one will also take place in Amsterdam in April/May 2007.

For some people it is difficult to raise funds to participate in European events. That the working language in European training courses is English may also be an obstacle. Therefore TAPE partners and associate partners are also organizing national training events. They differ so as to meet specific needs at the national level. Mostly they deal with one kind of material and are aimed at staff that is directly responsible for the material. For example a two-day seminar on video was held in Mikkeli, Finland. In Berlin, Germany, there was a three-day workshop on magnetic tapes that included a hands-on session.

EUROPEAN WORKSHOPS

The European workshops are 5-day training courses aimed at those responsible for managing audiovisual collections who have little or no specialist knowledge. They take as their starting point the principle that collection managers have to develop their own policies in which preservation and digitisation are combined, so as to ensure long-term access to materials. As different types of institutions hold a variety of audiovisual materials and their users do not all have the same requirements, there is not one standard approach that works in all cases. Moreover, although most audiovisual collections are mixed collections (containing film as well as sound and video, all in various formats), they are all a different mix, and with so many different materials the priorities for preservation will vary in every individual case. The workshops are not hands-on workshops but introductory courses, covering a wide array of topics against a background of technological developments, with ample room for discussion of problems the participants encounter in their own practice.

In the course the characteristics of film, video and sound recordings and the different recording systems and devices are reviewed. The focus is on gaining insight in issues that play a role in keeping audiovisual collections accessible over time. Preventive preservation - storage, environment, handling - is discussed as preventive measures can considerably extend the useful life of original materials. For some materials, primarily film but also some mechanical carriers, the originals may live well into the future and can be used for a long time provided playback equipment is available. Others will not be accessible in the future because they are rapidly deteriorating and/or playback equipment is quickly going out of use. For instance, the analogue tape industry has by now virtually disappeared and production of tape and equipment almost stopped. However well the tape is kept, information on such obsolete carriers will sooner or later have to be transferred to new media to remain accessible. In these cases preventive measures serve first of all to buy time for transfer of these recordings. Ultimately the digital copy will be the only available copy, even if the original tape would survive.

The possibilities offered by the new technology are reviewed against a framework of management of cultural collections. A good basic knowledge of technology is indispensable in order to set priorities in the management of collections, but the emphasis is on practical aspects and application of existing solutions, in a process of assessment, selection, planning and project management. Mostly those responsible for audiovisual materials do not have a technical training; they are not usually sound technicians or experts at digitisation. The courses provide the kind of overview of technical issues that should enable collection managers to cooperate with such experts, to know which questions to ask and which points to watch out for in the process of quality control.

Technology to digitise is now so widely available that it may seem unproblematic to have materials digitised. However, with the use of home equipment or the corner shop one cannot hope to achieve archival quality. Quality digitisation of analogue magnetic tape for instance requires good, modern replay equipment that needs to be adjusted by an expert for optimal signal extraction, and the analogue-to-digital converter incorporated in a computer's sound card will not yield the same quality as a professional, stand-alone converter. Transfer at the highest possible quality is essential for the audiovisual carriers that at some point in the future will no longer be accessible. Unlike with books and photographs, carriers dependent on replay equipment for access cannot be regarded as originals one can go back to should the need arise. Once the equipment is gone, they will become dead media whose content is out of reach. This is why digitisation of obsolete audiovisual media is both urgent and demanding. Moreover, as most nonspecialist collections are fairly heterogeneous in terms of formats, digitisation is quite costly, compared to the highly automated

processes broadcasters are developing for the masses of materials they hold in the same format. That makes a careful assessment of risks, possibilities and priorities even more important.

A certain familiarity with technical requirements is therefore essential for anyone undertaking a digitisation project. This includes insight into requirements for digital storage, which is a crucial issue for materials that take up substantial amounts of space, the more so as digital masters should be kept in uncompressed formats. When plans for digitisation of audiovisual materials are made, it has to be taken into account that special provisions for long-term, controlled storage may have to be made that were perhaps not so urgent when digitising text. The course therefore includes some discussion on different storage solutions within a context of sustainability of smaller collections.

Cataloguing and description, copyrights, presentation, and user requirements are addressed as well, as preservation is not an aim in itself and audiovisual materials should be brought out into the open. At the moment, although interest in audiovisual collections is growing, there are still serious obstacles for widespread use by researchers, for educational purposes and by the general public. Many collection managers are concerned about rights issues, especially as the rights associated with audiovisual materials, where composers, authors, performers, producers can all be involved, can be extremely complex. As long as materials could only be accessed within the institution, rights were not so much of a problem as they are now, when organizations would like to make materials available on internet. Technically presentation on the web is not straightforward either, as one has to consider bandwidth as well as various presentation formats (e.g. MP3, MPEG4, MOV, AVI) and players (e.g. Real Player, Windows Media Player, QuickTime).

The workshops offer a structured programme on these topics combining presentations by experts, group assignments and discussions. In view of the character of the workshop which requires active participation, the number of participants is limited to 20. The participants are asked beforehand to send in a short description of their institution and audiovisual collection and formulate specific questions they would like to be treated during the workshop.

The five days of the workshop are spread over a week, starting on a Wednesday and ending on Tuesday. An excursion to Cineco/Haghe Films, a company for film conservation, restoration and digitisation is part of the programme. A second excursion, to Beeld en Geluid (Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision), the Dutch broadcast archive, is also included. On purpose the course includes a weekend, so that participants have a day off on the Sunday, to digest what they have heard in the course of the first three days and explore Amsterdam.

THE WORKSHOP OF APRIL 2006 IN AMSTERDAM

More than 65 people, also from countries outside Europe, applied for the 20 places of the workshop. This made a selection necessary. The 20 participants spread over the archive, museum and library sector from 13 countries in Europe were chosen.

From the reports and questions the participants sent in before the course, it appeared that most of them had just started or were thinking about digitising their collections. Some mentioned that identification and documentation of materials were urgent problems: you need to know what you have before deciding how to deal with it. Participants were mostly seeking information related to technical issues, like storage, file formats, metadata, and standards. Some said they find it difficult to set priorities for their collection with the limited staff, and budget, available and were hoping the course would give them a handle on where to start.

In the course of the week the participants formed a real group, united in their commitment to their collections and enthusiasm for the material they manage. They appreciated the opportunity to meet colleagues with a similar background with whom they could share their experiences. They also enjoyed meeting colleagues who work in different areas and other countries, and they learned from each other's questions. It appears the course contributed a lot to an understanding of technical issues, as most participants indicated that the technical questions they had were clarified.

The course also helped to build up confidence with participants. As they often manage the (small) audiovisual collection in a (large) organization more or less on their own, it falls to them to make plans and convince the management of the organization to choose a particular direction. At the end of the course participants had developed a sense of where they wanted to go with their collection and felt they had the tools to provide arguments for their choices.

STUDY ON THE PRESENT SITUATION OF AUDIOVISUAL COLLECTIONS IN EUROPE

TAPE started off with a survey of problems and priorities in managing audiovisual collections. This built onto previous work done (inter)nationally and was specifically aimed at locating 'hidden' collections in a variety of institutions. The survey used desk research, working visits, existing data, and a questionnaire, which was made available in 8 languages. It was sent out in printed format and could also be filled out online. Over 370 organizations from more than 30 countries sent in the form.

The type of organizations that responded is varied and is spread over all sectors. The largest group is archives. This can partly be ascribed to the access TAPE partners have to networks of archival institutions, particularly in Poland and Italy where partners work with the state archives in their country. However, there were also a considerable number of responses from municipal and regional archives, business archives and a variety of archives working in a specific area.

The second largest group is libraries, including public libraries, national libraries, research libraries, music libraries and specialist libraries. Some larger libraries have special departments for audiovisual materials, which may be anything from a music library primarily for research to a multimedia centre with teaching materials. They have a large proportion of commercially produced materials for lending. Some national libraries in European countries have very extensive responsibilities for audiovisual heritage with regulations that require deposit of the national audiovisual production with the national library. Naturally these national libraries are amongst the largest in the survey.

Outside these two groups a variety of other institutions responded, research institutions, museums, and documentation centres built around a specific kind of music or dance.

The survey confirms, like participants of the workshop mentioned, that many institutions cannot identify and quantify all the materials they have. If they can give a general estimate, they often do not know how many material they have of each specific carrier. They also indicate there is a lack of knowledge regarding the contents of the materials in their care. The backlog in cataloguing the material is seen as the most urgent problem of the audiovisual collections. Many also mention problems with storage, environmental conditions and lack of replay equipment.

A large number of institutions are digitising material; mostly this means they make user copies, or copies on demand, of the material they hold. Although experts agree that for preservation of the information in some vulnerable carriers for which replay equipment is going out of use digitisation should urgently be undertaken as the only option to keep the material alive, it appears that systematic digitisation of at-risk carriers is primarily undertaken in the large, specialist audiovisual archives. This may be partly due to an optimistic assessment of the condition of certain carriers, in combination with uncertainty about longevity of digital materials. Many respondents expressed concern about digital preservation and lack of standards for digitisation. Many also indicated they do not have qualified staff and in general do not have sufficient resources for optimal management of their audiovisual collections.

The results of the survey are now being written up into an accessible introduction on audiovisual collections. This will be published later this year. Some of the TAPE partners will also produce reports on the situation in their own country.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

The TAPE project also includes some work on specific issues relating to management of audiovisual materials that may support training activities. A working group of technical experts is looking at the application of proven technology in non-specialist institutions. More particularly, the high-tech large-scale solutions being developed in broadcasting are reviewed to see whether they meet requirements of the heritage sector. Because of the diversity of media that characterizes mixed cultural collections low-cost small-scale solutions may offer viable alternatives. The technology working group will produce guidelines and recommendations that can be used to raise awareness of specific issues and would also be suitable for use in courses. Some translations of these publications or other existing materials are also planned, as there is a serious lack of introductory materials in languages other than English.

A second working group focuses on locating audiovisual research collections or materials kept by research institutes that are not even managed in a collection. This primarily concerns recordings made during academic fieldwork, of e.g. dance, rituals, language, oral history, music and song, but also interviews and documentaries produced in research projects. Archives now hold some of this material, but often it is kept in academic departments - or even by individual researchers - as little known 'hidden collections'. These materials reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity and a substantial part of it relates to the 'intangible heritage' of oral traditions, music, and performance as protected by the [Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Some of these collections have been identified in the survey, but more work to trace them needs to be done.

A third working group will be looking at presentation of audiovisual materials, primarily but not exclusively on the web. This concerns technical aspects such as delivery formats, search and retrieval, and contextualisation, with reference to different user groups (education, research, general public).

The activities of the working groups will result in publications, in print and on the web. A brochure on digital storage providing illustrations of different solutions, an overview on mechanical and magnetic carriers, a document outlining the digitisation workflow, and a DVD presenting different carriers and their characteristics, damage and deterioration are in preparation.

In the first year of the project, it has become clear that there is considerable interest in the work done in the project and the possibilities it offers to learn more about management of audiovisual collections. The partners hope that TAPE will be an inspiration to other organizations that can take the work further. It would, for instance, be particularly important to have more time devoted to audiovisual materials in training for archivists, librarians and museums staff in colleges and universities. Now this often takes up no more than a number of hours in a curriculum of several years. In many countries it would also be important to have a supporting network for nonspecialist institutions with audiovisual collections, so that those with limited resources can benefit from the experience and expertise in other heritage institutions. It should be recognized that although broadcasters and national audiovisual archives hold the bulk of the material and have a first responsibility for preservation, there is a lot more that needs to be taken care of urgently. The whole of the history of the twentieth century is contained in the millions of hours of audiovisual materials that are kept by thousands of organizations, and if we want to retain a complete picture, the net will have to be spread far and wide, from deposit collections to local museums and specialist research institutes all over Europe.

TAPE partners:

European Commission on Preservation and Access – Amsterdam
Finnish Jazz & Pop Archive – Helsinki
Head Office of State Archives in Poland – Warsaw
Phonogrammarchiv, Austrian Academy of Sciences - Vienna
Reproduction, Binding and Restoration Centre for the State Archives of Italy – Rome
Twenty associate partners from all over Europe also contribute to the program.

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive list of projects funded under the 5th & 6th Framework Programme, see:
http://cordis.europa.eu/ist/digicult/projects_all.htm

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

BRAVA - Broadcast Restoration of Archives through Video Analysis.
http://www.ina.fr/recherche/projets/encours/brava/index.fr.html

Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15782&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

Culture 2000: Presentation. http://ec.europa.eu/culture/eac/culture2000/cult_2000_en.html

ECPA - European Commission on Preservation and Access. http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/

FIRST . Film restoration and conservation Strategies.
http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?CALLER=PROJ_IST&ACTION=D&RCN=63255

Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision. http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/gvnnl/all/8FAE9963-0FAB-4112-BF19-325991A23477.html

PRESTO - Preservation Technology for European Broadcast Archives. http://presto.joanneum.ac.at/index.asp

PRESTO-Space - Preservation towards storage and access. Standardised Practices for Audio-visual Contents in Europe. http://prestospace.org/

TAPE - Training for Audiovisual Preservation in Europe. http://www.tape-online.net/