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Mixed Media: Working with Audio and Visual Materials— Heather Fox, Assistant Editor, University of Louisville

MACers interested in writing a column for Mixed Media are encouraged to contact Heather Fox at heather.fox@louisville.edu.

Let's Learn about Audiovisual Archives! (Some Reasons It's Not That Simple)

By Aaron Rosenblum, Filson Historical Society

Recently, I attended a series of webinars on audiovisual preservation. I did so in part to hear the content on the subjects of film and video, but with my own strong background in audio preservation, I was also there to see what is being taught in this area and what the needs of the attendees might be.

I was interested in what level of information—broad vs. granular, basics vs. technical minutiae—would be presented and what responses the presentations would elicit. Despite a wealth of good information introduced by instructors with impressive backgrounds, I was sad to see that at times the content seemed to pass over the heads of many attendees, sowing confusion rather than confidence. The consistent, respectful chatter and questions about basic concepts voiced in the webinar chat window supported my observations.

The instructors did their best to answer both simple and complex questions that arose during the webinars, but I was left feeling that there is not just a gap in knowledge between audiovisual experts and everyday archivists (this gap is inevitable), but a more basic gap needing to be filled. Both the instructors and the audience for such training may lack an understanding of what they themselves can offer or need and of what to expect from each other.

I come to this conversation from somewhere between the poles. I have been fortunate to work on audio preservation project planning within an institution; with a vendor, performing digitization transfer services; and on academic and government-sponsored research on standards and practices. I am also a musician and sound engineer, and was once a film projectionist. As such, I came to the field with knowledge of historical audio and film/video formats, and delved further from there. Plenty of other archivists have similar backgrounds—in music, film, photography, and so on—and are able to use their pre-existing knowledge of media as a jumping-off point. But like a lot of archivists, even those with a strong interest or background in audiovisual materials, I work primarily with manuscripts, fitting in work with my institution's audiovisual materials only as resources and time allow.

In several institutions, I have worked with bright, talented archivists of all ages and have been disheartened by my

colleagues' frustration when confronting the complicated processes of audiovisual preservation. It is no criticism to say that these skilled archivists were apprehensive about making decisions on audiovisual preservation because they did not feel comfortable with the materials. Nor is it a criticism of educators, vendors, or researchers. My purpose here is only to explore means by which these groups might better understand each other, communicate, and work together to accomplish the daunting task of preserving our audiovisual heritage.

Despite there being many trustworthy vendors and numerous trustworthy sources of information on audiovisual preservation, it certainly seems unwise for archivists to simply trust everything to consultants and vendors. But it may also be unrealistic to expect that archivists without an audiovisual background will be able to “catch up” in a short period of time. The latter is of course not due to any lack of ability, but to the constraints on time and resources we all face. If time and resources are limited, it is important to tease out what intellectual resources are needed. What does the archivist need to know about audiovisual preservation: a list of facts about historical formats; every facet and variable of the digitization process; the latest developments from the Library of Congress and other research agencies?

The answer in all cases is an unsatisfying “maybe,” but that doesn't mean the conversation is over. There's nothing wrong with not knowing the infinite number of theoretical and physical parts of an archival audio preservation plan, or of the related hardware and software systems required at each stage. What is important is to ask yourself which concepts need to be mastered to get the work done or plan to have the work done.

Make no mistake—the minutiae matter in this process, and following standards and best practices will add to the longevity of your digital assets. But, instead of striving to learn every facet of a published standard, perhaps it is enough to know that standard exists and is accepted within the field, so that you can ask your vendor to follow it. Meanwhile, a vendor who sends a complex specifications sheet to an institution that may hold limited audiovisual

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collections should not assume it will be completed. They will get a quicker, more confident response if they take the time to make sure the purchaser of their services understands the decisions that need to be made.

We all need to speak up for ourselves and for our own levels of knowledge. Many attending the webinar mentioned above did so, having decided not to be ashamed and to be tireless in asking for clarification, until they understood. Perhaps webinars, for all their strengths, are not the best venue for communicating complex topics to user groups with highly varied skill levels and backgrounds. Audiovisual preservation education may be better presented to small groups, possibly in person, so that the scope of a presentation can be changed on the fly, examples can be shown, and questions can be answered as they arise.

Because it is hard for archivists without knowledge of the subject area to know what they need to know, we must demand sensitivity and consideration from those with extensive knowledge of audiovisual preservation, be they

vendors, researchers, or educators. Those programming webinars or in-person seminars might question whether the person who knows the most about a field is best suited to teach those who know substantially less. I believe that vendors and educators are prepared to meet archivists wherever they're coming from in terms of knowledge, but those archivists need to be willing to speak up, do a little homework to bring knowledge to the table, and expect the process of learning about audiovisual preservation to be a long-term, ongoing task.

This column does not answer the urgent question I have heard constantly throughout my fairly short career as an archivist: "What should I do with my audiovisual materials?" I apologize for that. It is, however, a call for persistence, advocacy, and forethought among archivists approaching audiovisual preservation, and for sensitivity and patience from preservation educators, vendors, and researchers.



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