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Media Preservation in Libraries: A Profile

Have you noticed that the preservation of media-based cultural materials is a hot topic in the cultural heritage community? The current engagement of museums, libraries, and archives in audio-visual (a-v) media preservation issues is unprecedented. At AIC meetings in the very recent past, we have heard reports from museums striving to define what it means to preserve media art, websites, installations, and other interactive, time-based works. We've also learned about the high-profile activities at the Library of Congress such as its National Audio-Visual Conservation Center, a major milestone in our field's history. With the efforts of the National Film Preservation Board and the National Recording Preservation Board, both mandated by federal law to advise the Librarian of Congress on selections of historically-significant films and sound recordings for the national registries, a body of substantive survey findings, research reports, and expert testimonials defining the fundamental issues that characterize a-v preservation today has emerged.

One need only to reflect on the number of special a-v preservation programs and projects in recent years to appreciate the significance of this expanding trend. This year alone is marked by the American Library Association Preservation and Reformatting Section's third program in the series "Saving Sound" and an IMLS-funded program called "A Race Against Time: Preserving Our Audiovisual Media" organized by Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA). Also underway is a joint project at Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music and Harvard University's Music Library entitled "Sound Directions: Digital Preservation and Access for Global Audio Heritage," which is now in its second year and promises to result in a comprehensive set of best practice documents and a risk assessment tool. The zealous, generous support from numerous major foundations and federal agencies stokes the fire.

In addition to the Indiana and Harvard Universities project, a number of other research libraries are turning their attention to the preservation of their a-v collections. Unlike most museums, research libraries have accumulated very large holdings of media in the last half-century. Yet they have not formally addressed these materials in the scope of the library preservation programs . . . until now. One of the most prominent institutions on the scene is New York University. Emerging from the following exchange between the author and Paula De Stefano, head of preservation at NYU Libraries, as well as Sarah Ziebell, moving image preservation specialist, is an in-depth profile of the NYU Media Preservation Unit. The discussion serves to illuminate the need for highly-collaborative and adaptive approaches to integrate this essential and vital area of preservation into existing programs.

What were the key driving factors that motivated NYU to grow preservation services for media materials?

NYU: Our media holdings at NYU Libraries are voluminous—estimated numbers include over 70,000 audio and video items in the general collections of the Avery Fisher Center for Music and Media and 6,800 films, 10,500 videos, and 34,000 sound recordings in the Library's three special collections departments (Fales Library

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and Special Collections, the University Archives, and the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives). Prior to the advent of the Media Lab, the bulk of these materials had not been assessed for preservation and only a few items had been conserved. These holdings were increasingly in demand among researchers, who could not access them because of their fragile state. The Media Preservation Unit, concurrently established in 2003 with the graduate program in Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) in NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, was strategically created to address the urgent needs of these materials while at the same time offering an environment conducive to media preservation research.

How is the Lab equipped and what services are offered?

NYU: The Media Preservation Unit cares for materials from NYU Libraries' general and special collections. We offer preventive care services including the inspection of film and magnetic media to determine condition and improvement of the micro-environment through re-housing and conservation treatments such as minor repairs and cleaning. We coordinate most outsourced media preservation projects for the Libraries. This work ranges from performing research to identify the highest quality preservation elements, assisting with fundraising, serving as the main point of contact with vendors, and performing quality control on preserved materials. Much of our work is made possible by the assistance of graduate students in the MIAP Program, an academic department with which we also collaborate on preservation research projects.

We offer inspection, minor conservation treatment, and re-housing services for 35mm, 16mm, Super-8, and 8mm film and the array of audio and video open reel and cassette formats. Additionally, we have begun to develop our in-house reformatting capacities in the area of video.

Which materials are the current focus of preservation attention?

NYU: Right now, we have been emphasizing the inspection of archival materials over general collections



The Media Lab at NYU's Bobst Library. Photo courtesy NYU.

materials as there are so many archival items that are in such dire need of immediate conservation. We have done some initial research into potential uniqueness of some of the older items within the Avery Fisher Center [for Music and Media, which houses circulating materials], and this is likely to be the area in which we concentrate our future efforts in the general collections.

How did this expansion of services affect NYU's overall preservation program?

NYU: Initially, integrating non-book media into the preservation program was very awkward. There was a natural tendency among all levels of staff to simply adapt book preservation processes and procedures to audio/visual collections. This learning curve, however, was actually very instructive and forced us to develop new paradigms to accommodate these very different materials. In retrospect, the overarching principles of preservation remain intact, but the strategies employed to adhere to those principles are somewhat different and, certainly, the details and processes used to carry them out are very different. However, the more we worked with the collections, the preservation strategies became more clear, and, with that, programmatic details could be developed. The critical turning point was adding the necessary professional expertise to the department.

The most difficult aspect of integrating preservation program activities

for audio/visual collections is, of course, developing the resources to support it in the first place. The cost of preserving these materials is staggering. Re-allocation of resources is unavoidable for our preservation program and we are carefully planning to reorganize staff and funding resources to respond to the preservation needs of these materials. We anticipate a dramatic change in our preservation strategy in order to accomplish this. But this change needs to be done responsibly and must be accompanied by the development of reliable decision-making models that follow a balanced rationale.

Have these new activities and services impacted other library functions, such as collection development, public services, cataloging, storage, etc?

NYU: We have heard from some of the special collections departments that our ability to provide media preservation services has encouraged them to acquire more media-rich collections. Situated, as we are, in the middle of downtown New York City, storage remains a critical issue for us; we are in the process of researching options for long-term, off-site media storage, the needs of which will only continue to grow as we complete further preservation projects. We enjoy an excellent relationship with the Digital Library Team here at NYU Libraries, with whom we share the video remastering system and routinely collaborate

Each year, more special programs are initiated over and above the annual programs put on by associations dedicated to a-v preservation concerns, such as the Association of Moving Image Archivists and the Association for Recorded Sound Collections.

on the further development of in-house media reformatting and access services for library collections.

Are any research initiatives underway in conjunction with routine preservation activities?

NYU: In 2006, we embarked upon a three-year project funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to develop methodologies for assessing the condition of archival magnetic media based on visual and playback inspection in order to prioritize the relative need and appropriate pathways toward preservation. The resultant methodologies aim to determine whether visual inspection alone is adequate to collect accurate data for video and audio, or whether playback inspection is necessary for informed preservation decision making. In this project, we also are exploring the use of random sampling as a methodology for assessing archival audio/visual materials. We are collaborating with the Preservation Department of Columbia University Libraries (CUL) in this project, which began a two-year project in 2005, also supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to develop and test a survey instrument to inventory and assess CUL's processed and unprocessed archival audio/visual materials through visual inspection. Ultimately, NYU and CUL plan to create a freely accessible database for the moving image and sound preservation community that will be structured to serve as a comprehensive archival audio/visual inventory, assessment, and preservation prioritization tool.

What digital technologies are supported?

NYU: We are dealing with digital technologies most heavily in the area

of audio preservation, where we have moved to a digital preservation format, Broadcast WAV. In order to accomplish this, we have had to work closely with the Digital Library Team to determine the best methods for capturing meta-data and ingesting the files and meta-data into the Library's preservation repository upon completion of a preservation project.

Right now, we are using digital technologies primarily to create audio preservation masters; however, it is likely that we soon will be taking on some projects that have streaming audio or video access components, and this will change how we interact with the special collections departments in terms of delivery and long-term management of these assets. A little further down the road lies digital video preservation, which we have begun to research and develop pilot projects in conjunction with the Digital Library Team; we expect our efforts in this area to intensify greatly over the next few years.

What was the hardest part about getting this program off the ground?

NYU: Several things come to mind: inventorying the collections so that we could even begin to have a sense of what the holdings were; educating the special collections departments in what we could reasonably do to help them; locating the right staff and lab expertise to undertake the development of the program; and maintaining the balance between allocating time to routine item-level inspections and further long-term program development. Of course, adequate funding is essential. Without the assistance of an earlier grant from the Mellon Foundation in 2001, much of the initial work done to establish the NYU program would not have been possible.

How do you see the role of preservation departments in academic libraries changing with the increasing demand for media preservation?

NYU: There are a few emerging forces in the academic library community that we expect will influence changes in the traditional constellation

of preservation program activities. First, changes in the way academic libraries are used by their constituencies will clearly impact the allocation of scarce resources for preservation, and second, changes in the scope of material formats needed and used by those constituencies are likely to force changes in the services provided by many preservation departments. Audio/visual materials are an example of this. Demand for moving image and sound materials by faculty and students to support curricular activities and by scholars to support research is increasing. Academic libraries are obligated to respond to these demands and provide access to these rich resources. This carries with it the responsibility to preserve them while they are still salvageable. Clearly, in addition to developing the technical expertise to preserve and provide access to these materials, an infrastructure to support programmatic models and decision-making guidelines needs to be developed to direct this important work cost effectively and responsibly. Balancing this new demand with traditional preservation program activities is primarily where preservation departments need to become more agile.

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The Council on Library and Information Resources has published several reports commissioned by the National Recording Preservation Board, including "Capturing Analog Sound for Digital Preservation: Report of a Roundtable Discussion of Best Practices for Transferring Analog Discs and Tapes" and "Copyright Issues Relevant to Digital Preservation and Dissemination of Pre-1972 Commercial Sound Recordings by Libraries and Archives," among others. Available from www.clir.org.