

Introduction

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The start of the twenty-first century was revolutionary for the creators and collectors of recorded sounds and images. With the beginning of this new, increasingly digital era, anyone with a digital camera had a photo archive in the palm of his or her hand. Anyone with an MP3 player had a personal digitized music collection. Library users were increasingly interested in accessing information in digital formats. Libraries, archives and museums were faced with the realization that their collections no longer contained solely analogue materials such as books, paintings, prints, photos, audio- or videotapes, and film stock. It was time for institutions to make a move towards the future and incorporate 'digital heritage' into their collections, a significant part of which included sound and image (both still and moving) records.

As digital heritage grew at an unprecedented speed, questions about the new relationships between users and digital material started to emerge: Where was this new heritage to be stored? Who owns it? What is its life span? What is its current value, and how would it change over time?

Yet at the heart of this debate was the growing realization that most of the twentieth-century sound and image heritage was at risk of being lost due to technological obsolescence – essentially like “putting your memories in a lock box and throwing away the key” (Ulanoff, 2010).

Voicing the concerns of collecting cultural institutions, an appeal was launched to “draw attention to the perilous situations” of audiovisual archives and to “demonstrate the solidarity of archivists and users all around the globe” (UNESCO, 2005).

Taking action and building capacity

Recognizing the threats posed to audiovisual heritage, the International Centre for the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCR) initiated a survey involving museums, archives and libraries, and the results were startling. Cultural institutions faced the task of transitioning their collections from analogue to digital formats, but often they did not have the capacity to make these transitions and ensure long-term preservation of, and access to, sound and image records. Steps had to be taken to uncover effective storage methods and extend the useful life of materials by ensuring that suitable playback equipment was available and that formats continued to be readable.

ICCR's Sound and Image Collections Conservation (SOIMA) programme was envisaged as an innovative solution to build capacity for preserving sound and image heritage among cultural institutions. Forsaking a media-specific approach to training, SOIMA offered training on the preservation and use of mixed sound and image collections containing varied media types, e.g. film, photo, audio and video. The primary objective of the programme was to bring about a fundamental change by equipping professionals with the know-how to actively manage risks to their collections and migrate information from carrier to carrier in order to adapt to ongoing changes in technology.

The host of the first SOIMA course was Brazil's Arquivo Nacional (the National Archives). It exemplified the challenges faced by cultural institutions that had over time acquired mixed sound and image collections but had inadequate policies and programmes to deal with those collections' specific needs. Using the dynamic institutional context of Arquivo Nacional as a central case study, the first SOIMA course trained 19 professionals from 17 countries and as many institutions. The course topics gave them skills and knowledge to introduce context-specific strategies in their institutions. Since 2007, six other international courses in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America have been organized within the framework of the SOIMA course.

Each three-to-four week SOIMA course includes interactive and hands-on learning activities on topics such as extending the useful life of analogue formats, managing documentation backlogs, planning for digitization and granting user-driven access. SOIMA training has adopted a problem-solving approach to learning which allows participants to develop context-specific solutions. Course activities draw on participants' as well as lecturers' varying experiences in different cultural and institutional contexts; this helps foster cross-disciplinary cooperation that continues long after the training is over. The course curriculum, however, is dynamic and reflects the current shift towards open and connected collections that anticipate users' needs and promote creative use.

The SOIMA network

Post-training, an informal network of 120 SOIMA participants spanning 56 countries and 109 institutions is opening doors for new initiatives. In order to build capacity, the network

has developed a new generation of trainers, workshops and formal programmes. For example, in Brazil and Chile, university courses have been introduced by former SOIMA participants while others have taken on the challenge of hosting international SOIMA courses.

SOIMA participants have been equally successful in developing creative solutions for preservation and access in different parts of the world, which have enriched the existing knowledge pool.

Judith Opoku-Boateng is an archivist at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana and a former participant of a SOIMA course. In her paper presented at the 2015 SOIMA conference, she explains her innovative method of treating archives as one would care for human babies. Her “baby nursing model” has been adopted within her archive, and Judith has had a great influence over her institute’s workflow and techniques.

Samuel Franco Arce attended SOIMA training, and his Casa K’ojom in Guatemala has made great strides in the recording, dissemination and preservation of intangible Mayan heritage. Arce’s struggles, described in his paper, to guarantee a secure future for his archive are relatable for other members of the SOIMA community. Discussion on this topic in an international setting opens new pathways for sustaining sound and image heritage.

The SOIMA conference

Given the shifts that have taken place in values, approaches and technologies since the inception of the SOIMA programme, ICCROM, in collaboration with the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), decided to organize an international conference in Brussels in 2015.

The objectives of the SOIMA conference were to review the training in relation to the challenges of sustaining sound and image collections in the twenty-first century. Hilke Arijs, a former SOIMA participant working for KIK-IRPA, collaborated with the ICCROM team to bring in partners from the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, the Flemish Interface Centre for Cultural Heritage (FARO), AVPreserve, the Baltic Audiovisual Archival Council, the Museo delle Culture in Milan, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, PACKED vzw (the Flemish Centre of Expertise in Digital Heritage), Wikimedia Belgium, Memnon Archiving Services, the Flemish Institute for Archiving (VIAA), the Academy of Flanders (KVAB) and the Fédération Internationale des Archives de Télévision / International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT/IFTA).

Capitalizing on SOIMA’s global insights, the conference was envisioned as an opportunity for cross-disciplinary discussion and collaboration beyond professional and institutional boundaries.

This publication

This publication brings together selected readings and captures the essence of the SOIMA 2015 conference. Sound and image collections comprise more than physical carriers; they are the memories, the expressions of cultures.

S. Mshai Mwangola, a performance scholar, presents a remarkable paper that tells the story of dirge singers in East Africa whose performances give meaningful insight into their community’s relationship with life and death. Mwangola seeks to highlight the important role of the archivist in capturing, storing and preserving the singers’ masterpieces and rituals for future generations.

David Monacchi uses digital sound recordings to document endangered ecosystems in regions all over the world, demonstrating the benefits of sound and image collections to the fields of science and environmental studies.

Saskia Willaert has digitized collections of musical instruments in Africa and has published online an otherwise inaccessible segment of musical heritage.

Chris Lacinak provides an in-depth look at the cost of inaction in dealing with backlogs of collections. His innovative approach frames how to overcome the challenge of digitization backlogs in effective and efficient ways. At the other end of the spectrum, Johan Oomen describes cutting-edge management systems and tools for providing access to digital sounds and images that have been introduced in the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.

That sound and image collections can be the memory-keepers, the holders of community stories, the recorders of fleeting traditions or of an endangered natural phenomenon was the key takeaway of the conference. At the end of the conference, participants gathered to reflect on strategies for conserving sound and image collections and came up with a Ten Year Vision for the future of sound and image heritage (Fig. 1). Their insightful discussions led to a collective realization that in order to sustain these collections over time, we need to move from closed to open networks, establish cross-disciplinary partnerships and build platforms that enable creative use as well as provide long-term storage solutions.

