

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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Preserving Audiovisual Documents: An International Perspective

The theme of this SEAPAVAA Conference is 'AV Archives: Why They Matter'. However, at the risk of being booted off this stage, I first wish to ask, do they actually matter? On the eve of the centennial of the start of World War 1, the war to end all wars, have audiovisual archives contributed to attaining the ever elusive goal of world peace? Have they ended the social ills of global poverty or insecurity? Not even the most ardent archivist will categorically affirm this. Yet, so many professionals make it their life's work to preserve audiovisual documents. So many of you have come quite a long distance to attend this conference. So perhaps they do matter.

In order to assess the issue of why they matter, I will first examine the impact that audiovisual documents have had.

This theme is of great personal interest as it relates to an area where I have spent significant part of my professional life. I first started to work in the audiovisual archives field in 1991 and I still recall this remark by Anna Lena Wibom, an early President of the International Federation of Film Archives, who contended that 'The camera is the pencil of our century'. The pertinence of her observation has remained with me over the years, as it seemed so apt at the time, and continues to be valid to the present, even if other media such as the tape recorder could also have been cited.

Audiovisual documents are just one of the many means adopted by human beings to share their message, their views and their thoughts on areas of importance to them. From oral narrations to stone inscriptions, from parchment to print, from clay tablets to e-tablets, people in all walks of life have tried to find an enduring format to preserve and transmit their knowledge. Audiovisual documents speak to us in an appealing and democratic way, unlike some tomes of old that were chained in libraries and reserved for the erudite few.

They reinforce the ability to share experiences across linguistic borders whether describing the awe associated with new inventions, or empathy elicited through the calamities of war and disasters. The 'thrill of victory... and the agony of defeat' according to the catch-phrase of one television sports programme. In the words of Caroline Frick, the past President of the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations: 'Recorded sound and moving images have captured some of the most influential human achievements, daily events, and tragedies of our world'.

Who has forgotten Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon in 1969? Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990? The Indian Ocean tsunami on Boxing Day in 2004? These are just three of the thousands of moments that resonate in the global collective consciousness; moments that have been shared by the populace of all countries around the world.

Audiovisual documents can consequently be considered one means of communication whose impact is instantaneous. They contribute to establishing feelings of a common identity and to a sharing of cultures. It is therefore imperative that they be preserved, and disseminated, to good effect. Unfortunately, in many areas of the world, awareness of their influence is lacking

and not much consideration is given to their long-term preservation. Inevitably, the records of historic events, such as mentioned earlier, will ultimately disappear, bringing collective amnesia about the past in their wake.

Audiovisual documents can also be described as the chronicles of our times. They enable us to better understand and interpret our history; to better articulate and reconcile the contradictions of the past. However, for years, they were considered as simply a means of entertainment that had no lasting value. It was only in 1980 after UNESCO's Member States adopted the 'Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images' that the foundation was laid for a global movement to 'prevent the loss, unwarranted disappearance or deterioration of any item of the national production'.

The Recommendation was a significant milestone as it provided legitimacy for the work of the audiovisual archives profession, which until then had been largely overlooked. It has also led to universal recognition that our audiovisual heritage needs to be safeguarded for future generations. The Recommendation notes that audiovisual documents provide a fundamental means of recording the unfolding of events and, as such, constitute important and often unique testimonies, of a new dimension, to the history, way of life and culture of peoples and to the evolution of the universe.

This is not just overblown rhetoric, but truly describes the importance of audiovisual archives to the world. I have therefore answered my initial question; audiovisual archives do matter! Without them, our world would be bereft of an integral part of its ethos, of each nation's cultural identity, and of our collective consciousness.

I would even venture to suggest that it is a sacred duty to preserve these documents. In 1997, UNESCO's Member States adopted the *Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generation Towards the Future Generation*. This Declaration focuses on safeguarding "the values and principles enshrined in the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*". In the preamble to the UNESCO text, it is noted that "at this point in history, the very existence of humankind and its environment are threatened". Article 1 specifically identifies that "the present generations have the responsibility of ensuring that the needs and interests of present and future generations are fully safeguarded."

All memory institutions contain the records of policies and decisions made by governments and public or private bodies, and are the memory of their host or parent institution. They document decisions and commitments, and are a mechanism for accountability and transparency in daily practices. They therefore play a crucial role in promoting the cause of effective and democratic government by providing access to information concerning official or governmental decisions or the rights of citizens.

Information is invaluable in support of development, defence of rights or understanding of the past. It needs to remain accessible and the risk of collective amnesia through the irremediable losses of important source materials is imponderable. The UNESCO study *Lost Memory - Libraries and Archives destroyed in the Twentieth Century* details the destruction of, and irreparable damage to, library collections and archival fonds in 20th century alone. Radio and television losses received only brief mention and no detailed study on audiovisual archival losses, especially in developing countries, has so far been carried out by UNESCO, although it has conducted surveys of endangered audio carriers to make informed decisions on resource planning and migration priorities. The results confirmed fears about the rate of decay of carriers of recorded sound but also revealed that the most endangered recordings are not

necessarily the oldest.

Although the 1980 Recommendation was the first legal instrument that recognized audiovisual documents as an intellectual legacy, and also official acknowledgement that this heritage is equal to others, at the time of its adoption, few countries had audiovisual archives; trained specialists were rare; legislation was largely inexistent; and the climate of ignorance was not particularly conducive to their establishment.

More than thirty years later, while some of the issues affecting audiovisual archiving have not yet been fully addressed, there is a definite shift in perception and a general awareness that this heritage is important to humanity.

Some of the significant results that can be enumerated include tangible products such as the *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles*: a seminal work for the development of the profession; the publication of legal and technical guidelines for the establishment of archives; technical standards for preservation have been, and are being, discussed and promoted; professional capacities have been enhanced through technical symposia and regional training workshops in Africa, Asia, Caribbean, and Latin America, in addition to the creation of formal curricula for audiovisual archivists; archival associations such as SEAPAVAA and the CCAAA of which SEAPAVAA is a member, have been established.

SEAPAVAA as a regional body, and I use the term 'regional' very broadly, was the first non-European organization, according to UN definition, that I am aware of, that was established with a specific view of focusing on the issues of a particular region.

Because of this evolution, overall a more positive picture of audiovisual archives exists than in 1980. Although it has now been largely superseded by technological advances, innovations and other developments in many areas, the Recommendation has contributed to the establishment of audiovisual archives in many countries, putting the topic on national agendas and making it acceptable for audiovisual heritage to be considered at least as equal in national importance as books and other printed items.

Despite the continuing existence of issues that have yet to be resolved, this Recommendation has been instrumental in gradually changing mindsets. Although it is not legally binding, a number of archives have used it to effect positive change within their countries even if countless others still suffer from lack of recognition, legislation and funding that will permit them to function efficiently.

Further attention is needed as the world's audiovisual heritage is fated to disappear from the moment of its creation! The only uncertainty is when, not if, it will disappear. I have no need to describe in this conference the many problems associated with chemical decay, or those brought about by technological progress or human agency. To support the invaluable work being done by audiovisual archives and associations to promote public understanding of the risks, in 2005, UNESCO's General Conference proclaimed 27 October as the annual *World Day for Audiovisual Heritage*. That day was chosen to commemorate the date that the 1980 Recommendation was adopted.

The World Day provides much needed publicity of the need to preserve audiovisual documents as a major contributor to laying the foundation for freedom of opinion and expression, as well as to building mutual respect among peoples.

Awareness of the challenges associated with audiovisual archives is better known and collaboration in finding solutions has been established. However, for these actions to succeed, they must be grounded in a global action that attracts and holds attention.

In recent years, one such activity has been launched and is growing in impact. This is UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme!

The Programme was created in 1992 to provide an international platform to explore the risks of losing documentary heritage and to secure solutions for its long-term protection. In its slightly more than 20 years of existence, MoW has evolved to become the global brand, or UNESCO's flagship activity for the protection of, and access to, documentary heritage. The three main objectives of the Programme are to:

- o preserve the world's documentary heritage.
- o promote universal access to this heritage.
- o raise global awareness of its significance.

Within the framework of this Programme, documentary heritage is identified as the entire spectrum of means used to record knowledge: stone or rock inscriptions; writings on wood, papyrus or vellum; printed books, photos or maps; radio and television recordings as well as present day digital documents.

The Memory of the World serves to spread awareness of the impact of significant events and developments on people. It facilitates the process of retrieval of information in the search of truth and identity, and as a collective tool in restitution against the injustices of the past. It helps to ensure both individual and collective rights against policies of silence and oblivion, by instituting the right to memory. However, this is possible only if those searching for information know where it can be located.

For this reason, Memory of the World registers were established. Inscription on a Register obviously raises the profile of documentary heritage in the country or countries concerned. But its main impact should be that it also acknowledges the importance of legacy items. This can be catalytic in attracting private and/or public attention to the outstanding work undertaken in memory institutions. Over the years, an increasing number of countries and institutions submit their most meaningful nominations for inscription on a register. This act helps in scaling-up public understanding of the Programme. Just the public recognition of heritage with which you are closely associated will awaken feelings of pride in your identity.

Some 300 items that have been judged to be of world significance are presently listed on the International Register, with many others listed on regional and national registers. These help to make people in different parts of the world aware of developments that have occurred elsewhere. One notable example is the Kelly Gang whose inscription has opened the eyes of many people to the fact that Hollywood was not the first producer of the world's first full-length narrative feature film. Audiovisual documents are poorly represented. Of the 300 items, only 45 are truly audiovisual, although about 20 others have audiovisual documents as a component of the collection.

The Programme therefore aids in the interpretation of history by multiplying different perspectives and thereby redressing the balance of views as it gives back their voice to

minorities and other lesser known groups. Audiovisual documentary heritage, in particular, provides the means for sharing heritage across countries and cultures.

Unfortunately, radio and television recordings, in particular, have either been erased and recorded over, or have deteriorated to such an extent that the content is no longer accessible. As a result, the histories and the feats of the past are no longer known, or remain as dim recollections for the few.

The resulting alienation from history means the dispossession of identity. It is therefore imperative that no further losses occur. Recording the memories, the cultures and languages will help to recreate legacies to the extent possible and prevent future generations from experiencing similar losses. But we are on the verge of a potential catastrophe. Digital media have overtaken analogue as the main means of recording events and daily occurrences that may later have historical significance. In 2012, Africa reportedly had more than 650 million mobile phone subscribers - more than the European Union and the United States. According to one report mobile phones are used for 'political activism, education, entertainment, disaster management, agriculture and health'.

So it should not be forgotten that these phones also record information and consequently are, figuratively speaking, repositories of knowledge. In the same way that the earliest films were not considered documentary heritage or even worthy of preservation and resulted in horrendous losses, unless digitally recorded information is safeguarded, the entire world will lose huge parts of its memory.

These assumptions therefore provide the framework for my presentation. It is based on two simple principles: firstly that documentary heritage belongs to all peoples of the world and should be preserved for continued accessibility, and secondly that we have a duty to meet and anticipate the needs of present and future generations.

As described by a former Archivist of Canada:

'We are all in the information business. Our greatest skill is in knowing how to turn information into knowledge. This intellectual alchemy is a process without which our history would be incomprehensible and pattern less—some accidental or arbitrary alignment of time and opportunity, people and place'.

In this act of turning information into knowledge, the work of UNESCO is complemented by other initiatives with which it is closely associated and in which I would encourage your participation. These include the *World Digital Library* which was formally launched in 2009. It offers advanced search and browse features, including a 'listen to this page' for the visually disabled, in seven languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. Content is available in more than forty languages and is derived from books, manuscripts, maps, photographs, sound recordings, and films of cultural and historical significance.

Its major objectives are to:

- o Promote international and intercultural understanding and awareness
- o Expand multilingual and culturally diverse content on the Internet
- o Provide resources to educators and contribute to scholarly research
- o Build knowledge and capacity in the developing world

Several items on the Memory of the World international register, as well as a few national registers, are already included in the World Digital Library. This forms part of an agreement that items on a MoW Register should be included on the Library. All national memory institutions are invited to join the WDL and contribute their content.

The *Archives@Risk* project, which is a joint activity of the CCAAA, has as its objective to unite collections, archives and professionals by offering models to improve archival practice. It is intended to be supra-organizational by providing the means for countries, archives and industries to collaborate outside traditional programmes when needed. In this way, endangered audiovisual heritage that is not preserved in established memory institutions will not be overlooked or forgotten entirely.

Dietrich Schüller, who is no stranger to the audiovisual community, is currently leading the fight against what he calls the magnetic tape apocalypse. Magnetic audio and video tape formats are now obsolete, and playback equipment is rapidly disappearing as manufacturers have ceased its production. Because magnetic tape heads have a typical life span of 2000-3000 hours, once the tape heads have worn out, all tapes will become unplayable. Recently, a final production run of 600 replay heads used in a standard audio tape player was completed. At this point, when these have worn out, a significant part of the world's memory held in many cultural and research institutions will be lost. Urgent action must be taken now, and all audiovisual archives informed of this impending potential disaster.

The Working Group on Information Preservation of the Information for All Programme (IFAP) of UNESCO has taken up the initiative to alert stakeholders of this imminent and increasing threat, and assessing the magnitude of endangered audiovisual heritage which will be lost if the material is not transferred in time. A survey is being conducted and a website will be established to provide more detailed information on the safeguarding of magnetic tape recordings and on long-term preservation of audiovisual documents in general. It will contain links to standards and recommendations from professional NGOs.

In the September 2012 *Memory of the World in the Digital age* international conference, participants explored the key issues affecting the preservation and long-term accessibility of digital documentary heritage. The conference recommendations were set out in the UNESCO/UBC Vancouver Declaration. This was addressed to UNESCO, its Member States, professional stewardship associations and the private sector. The key recommendation was that a roadmap should be drafted that proposes solutions, agreements and policies for implementation by all stakeholders.

The major findings of the Conference were that a better understanding of the digital environment was essential in order to establish preservation models that respect fundamental legal principles and balance concerns about access with privacy. It urged that digital preservation become a development priority with appropriate investments in infrastructure for long-term accessibility and usability, and to minimize the risk of digital records rapidly becoming inaccessible. Closer collaboration among international professional associations and other international bodies was encouraged for the management and preservation of digital information.

In cooperation with relevant Dutch bodies, work is underway for the establishment of PERSIST, the 'Platform to Enhance the Sustainability of the Information Society Transglobally'. Part of the objectives is to set up a neutral forum where stakeholders

representing government, heritage institutions, government and industry can discuss issues relating to long-term access and trustworthy preservation.

These are a just a few of the international actions that have been, or continue to be implemented. In the time remaining, I wish to briefly look towards the future and what can be done to overcome some of the challenges which the audiovisual archives community faces.

The role of audiovisual archivist is quite complex! Not only must you maintain the authenticity of items in your care, you must guarantee its integrity, and protect it from damage, censorship and deliberate alteration. Archivists must resist different types of pressure. These may be ideological, political and /or economic. But archivists must ensure that the public good is served in the selection and retention policies they adopt and implement.

In this, it is vital to continually run a publicity campaign or programme that helps to explain and demonstrate why audiovisual documents, be they the products of recorded sound, film or television, in analogue or digital versions, why these are a critical element of our lives and why they must be preserved.

In the *Memory of the World Digital age* conference, several sessions were devoted to the specific issues relating to audiovisual documents. Among these was the question of universal access to heritage. This is indeed a laudable objective and in principle, few will query this. For the audiovisual memory institutions with millions of items in need of reformatting for simple playback, one key overriding question persists: Who will pay? Pay for the acquisition and maintenance of the equipment that allows access; pay for long term preservation of these objects.

The sheer quantity of documents is staggering! Despite very commendable efforts, only a small proportion of all audiovisual documents ever created have been preserved or still manage to survive. With the increasing emphasis on digital production, the problem has become exponentially complicated.

To add to an already difficult situation, the global economic crisis is a key element that must be factored into management plans. The costs of preservation, as well as those related to digitization of collections, need to ensure long-term sustainability and in-time migration when required. Most governments are unaware of the true costs of digital management and fail to make adequate provision in budgetary allocations. With chronic staff shortages and limited financial means, inter-institutional cooperation has to be high on the agenda of audiovisual archives.

It is also essential to establish close cooperation with the private sector to find solution in the development of products that facilitate long term retention and preservation of information. This will be an uphill task but only by encouraging private sector companies to see themselves as integral to the knowledge management sector, can they be incited to think beyond short term profits.

Legal matters, including the issue of orphaned works, especially hamper access to, and use of, items preserved by public or audiovisual archives. It must be made clear that archives are carrying out their mandate of safeguarding not just the carriers of the world's cultural heritage, but the knowledge which they transmit. Discussions have been initiated at the World Intellectual Property Organization involving memory associations to approve a legal

framework of Copyright Limitations and Exceptions for Libraries and Archives with respect to digital documentary heritage. In essence, it explores areas not included in much of current legislation such as the large-scale digitization of collections and online resources. The challenge of maintaining balance on the tightrope between preservation, research and study on the one hand and protecting the legitimate rights of creators and producers on the other, will keep audiovisual archives quite busy for years to come.

The issues and challenges ahead are many and varied. Yet, let us not forget that a few people in the ASEAN region felt the need in the early 1990s to create a forum to discuss common issues and concerns concerning audiovisual archiving. Today SEAPAVAA is a vibrant and growing body and shows what determination and commitment can achieve.

In conclusion, effective development depends upon an equally effective records management infrastructure. Without this infrastructure, the efficiency of governments is compromised and they can lose their capacity to rely on the experience of the past as guidance. Policies cannot be developed or implemented in a transparent manner, nor can citizens' rights be adequately protected. Records are thus inextricably intertwined with transparency, accountability and good governance.

Archives are the foundations of building knowledge societies in developing countries with their immense repositories of knowledge which inform and educate the public. Communities need information to develop but access to the information held in archives is not a panacea. Although information is a prerequisite for development, in itself it is insufficient. It is, however, the basis on which responsible governance is constructed and will be the driving force behind sustainable economic and social development. Archives need to be acknowledged for their role as the core of information and content providers in the development process. They should no longer be considered simply as repositories of records that bear historical importance only. For a country to develop and achieve its potential, archives and records must be the foundation upon which the nation is built.

Somewhat tongue in cheek, at the beginning of the session, I asked what have audiovisual archives done to cure social ills of our time. While archives alone will not cure diseases, reduce child mortality, promote gender equality, end illiteracy or eradicate extreme hunger and poverty, they do enable access to the information that can solve many of these problems.

And that's why I can answer my own query and assert: audiovisual archives do matter!