Production, Preservation, and Access: 
The Struggle to Retain Audiovisual Archives

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Abstract: Canadian audiovisual production in film or video, on tape or CD are in danger of deteriorating and, what is available, of becoming inaccessible. This was the conclusion of a Federal Task Force report titled Fading Away in 1995. The problem is all the greater six years later. Apart from the loss of a valuable heritage, the lack of support for the preservation of and access to audiovisual production is detrimental to major research interests in communications and related social sciences. This paper presents a general discussion of the issues involved and a call to action.

In 1995, the authors of Fading Away: Strategic Options to Ensure the Protection of and Access to Our Audi-Visual Memory were compelled to make the following statement: “Vital elements of Canada’s audio-visual heritage are disappearing, deteriorating and becoming inaccessible—and the rate of these losses is alarming. Audio-visual materials are inherently fragile, subject to rapid physical degradation and technological obsolescence” (Canada, 1995, p. 1). Now, six years later, the problem is all the greater. Apart from the loss of a valuable heritage, the lack of support for the preservation of audiovisual production and limited access to what is available is detrimental to major research interests in communications and related social sciences.

The objective of this essay is to open a debate on the preservation of audiovisual archives and their accessibility to members of the research community. For the most part, researchers have been silent regarding this problem. This may be...
because of a lack of information, or simply a lack of interest. It may be because archival needs are specific to the project of the day and thus researchers are indifferent to the more general issues surrounding the collection and preservation of audiovisual archives. The intent here is to point to the importance and gravity of the issues entailed and to call the research community to action. This is neither a treatise on methodology nor an analysis of archival records. It is a consideration of the complex issues surrounding the production, preservation, and accessibility of archival records of interest to researchers in communications. The critical problems are those of resources for preservation and ready, “hassle-free” access. Resources for preservation, especially in Canada, are hard to come by and acquiring access to what is available is a challenge. It is a challenge because the array of records available is vast and there are few co-ordinated search mechanisms available.

Production

Though typically associated with historical research, communications research, historical or otherwise, uses archival records at one point or another in the course of a given project. It should be noted that in the case of audiovisual research an archival record, the production element in the process, is information in any form (items referring to the past, present, or future), ranging from paper records (textual, including newspapers) to moving images (film and video) and audio recordings. The records may have been broadcast over radio or television or made available on the Internet or written in connection with audiovisual presentations (scripts, policy statements, administrative correspondence, etc.). A researcher may have acquired the records through taping broadcasts or downloading files (problems with copyright violations are usually involved in such practices) or through access to a corporate or public archive where the required records are available.

Indeed, the taped interview or the interview transcribed on paper may also be considered an audiovisual archival record. In short, very little research in the social sciences can proceed without access to archival records. The concern here is specifically with audiovisual records, comprising “records in all media produced and/or received by an individual, a public or private organization. This includes textual or graphic documents or unedited footage which can explain the production context of an audio-visual work” (Canada, 1995, p. 13).

Frequently missed in discussions of audiovisual materials are, as quoted above, the “textual or graphic documents … which can explain the production context of an audio-visual work” (p. 15). Because of the very strong tendency for researchers in communications studies to adopt content, discourse, or narrative analyses of the final product (the newscast, the television drama, the Web site, etc.), there is a neglect, on the part of the researcher and the archivist, of the “paper trail” accompanying the tapes or recordings. For example, sooner or later, someone may well publish an extensive critical analysis of the television drama 

The Sopranos aired on CTV this past fall and originally aired on the U.S. channel HBO. The researcher will have taped the broadcasts or purchased the videos com-
mercially. However acquired, the scripts, contracts, and correspondence associated with production and the acquisition of the series by CTV will likely be ignored. There will be no attempt to locate the material, it will be considered irrelevant to the analysis. And yet the theoretical and methodological literature contains ample references to the necessity of viewing production in its broader social and political context (see, for example, DeSousa, 1999; Griswold, 1994; Thompson, 1990).

At the ownership level of production, the producer views the record as intellectual property and a commodity. The archivist is caught in the middle, especially when, as is sometimes the case, a producer is quite prepared to turn an original over to an archive but not prepared to allow an archival copy to be made for use by researchers. The archivist in turn is reluctant to allow public use of an original. There is a contradiction here fundamental to the process which can only be resolved in practice in given situations. To take this a step further opens additional difficulties for the researcher. Assuming that a search is successful and the required record(s) are located, who owns the copyright? It may not be the owner of the record and the owner may not, therefore, be in a position to release the record for viewing. It is the responsibility of the user to locate the copyright owner. This can be a formidable task, with a very high potential for failure.

**Preservation**

Following production, the archival process begins with the selection of a segment of a set of products for preservation. For example, a search for the records of the *Winnipeg Tribune* would probably lead the researcher to the University of Manitoba Archives. And, yes, he or she would find a collection put together after the collapse of the *Tribune* in 1980. However, an initial search will reveal that the collection is composed of a selection of the newspaper’s research and morgue files. Who made the selection? Selections in cases such as these are usually made by or in consultation with professional archivists. The issue though is by what criteria, and will the criteria used fit the needs of academic researchers? Among archivists it is not unusual to witness arguments over whether the preservation of “Canada’s Audio-visual Heritage” should be limited to documentaries or include fiction. I recall discussions with CBC personnel regarding a requirement for administrative documents related to drama production (contracts, producer to writer memos and correspondence, producers’ editorial notes on scripts, etc.). Why, they wondered, would someone interested in the study of drama, require these documents, documents they were preparing to destroy? Selection criteria are related to interest and definitions of the situation. A drama critic’s criteria would be quite different from those of a communications researcher. The core problem here has to do with the way in which different and often conflicting interests define a document or record.

The researcher is concerned with the document as evidence or as a unit of analysis relative to a particular research problem. The archivist is interested in the document as a monument to past events of “national significance.” Production units and companies are interested in the document as a commodity for inclusion
in future productions or for later sale. Clearly the stakeholders are many and the interests require mediation. But, by whom?

Once selected, records must be preserved. Preservation is a highly technical and costly process. At the cost of $1,900 per hour for copying film, $120 per hour for video, and $40 per hour for sound recordings, it was estimated in 1995 that the total cost of attending to Canadian materials in most urgent need of care was $77.5 million (Canada, 1995). At a minimum, special storage facilities are required to prevent deterioration from humidity, temperature fluctuations, and acids in paper, metal, and on film. Archivists refer to “preservation management,” which includes all activities related to preserving the selected records, ranging from climatically controlled vaults to monitoring the techniques of handling materials under examination. There is not only the problem of preparing new documents for proper storage, but also the problem of recouping older documents in a state of deterioration. For example,

Many audio-visual holdings are threatened by the degradation of the very materials with which they are created … the images on nitrate and acetate film stocks are subject to rapid deterioration once the inevitable decomposition of the base stock begins. This has been the cause of the loss of some of the earliest moving images in Canada. With the introduction of magnetic sound and video recording, the rapid shifts in technology have meant a constant investment to copy materials from one format to another. (Canada, 1995, p. 25)

The costs of preservation are beyond the capabilities of small collections in a variety of institutions. Universities are able to assume some costs, especially when archival collections are combined with library services or with the need for administrative archives. Production industries are not likely to invest heavily in restoration and preservation, though a few have done so. On the other hand, public agencies (e.g., the CBC, the National Archives, the National Film Board) have invested heavily in combination with interested citizens in both the public and private sectors.

Access

Once preserved in an archive, access to the record is the next problem facing the researcher. Accessibility refers to the necessity of a place where records may be viewed and studied under appropriate conditions and supervision. Accessibility also refers to the necessity of clearly stated rules regarding copyright protection and the legal uses to which a record may be put. Ideally, the archiving agency will have made an examination copy of the record, this is especially important for audiovisual records, in order to prevent loss of or damage to the original. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, current copyright rules discourage copying, even in an archival situation.

Finding a collection related to a particular research problem may consume a considerable amount of time with a fairly high chance of failure. Assuming the pertinent collection is found and must be physically visited, can the researcher obtain permission to view the record? Public and university archives and some
small institutional collections are open, but newspapers and broadcasting organizations can be especially difficult to penetrate. Indeed, without contacts high up in the corporate structure of media companies or a personal friend at lower levels, it is next to impossible to gain access. Of course, access can begin with web searches. The problem here lies in the sheer number of sites available. A simple search on Yahoo using “audio-visual archives” as key words will yield 123 matching sites and about 48,700 Web-page sites. The variety is overwhelming with innumerable university, government, public, private, associational, and producer archives all offering services in the field.

A casual sampling of these sites is instructive. Newspaper sites have a limited value. Some, like the Ottawa Citizen (URL: http://www.ottawacitizen.com), in addition to providing a search engine for on-line articles for a limited period, offer research services at a reasonable users’ fee. The private and public broadcasters also offer limited services. University sites may or may not provide easy access to their archival collections. The University of Manitoba (URL: http://www.umanitoba.ca) possesses an extensive special collections and archival link on its library page. It covers television and radio drama as well as related textual materials. Using RealPlayer, visitors may listen to selected recordings. McMaster University (URL: http://www.mcmaster.ca/library) provides a listing of campus archives with a search engine for audiovisual records and related texts. Most university sites are well organized, some are not. Concordia University (URL: http://www.concordia.ca) is among the latter. The problem, not uncommon in educational institutions, is that the institutional archives collection excludes several archives associated with libraries and research centres. In these cases, most archival collections, some with their own Web pages, are separate from library pages and difficult to locate.

Some provincial government archives give access to archival pages, often in the form of a limited description of the collections and an invitation to further inquiries. The Government of Saskatchewan (URL: http://www.gov.sk.ca) refers to its collection of moving images of government and independent productions and a large collection of local television and radio news casts in addition to radio drama. The Government of Manitoba (URL: http://www.gov.mb.ca) archive’s media divisions carry extensive sound, film, video, and related textual records.

There are more inclusive sites of specialized materials, especially outside of Canada. For example, there is the DiVan project in Europe, currently a prototype carrying extensive video and audio materials (URL: http://wwwlis.iei.pi.cnr.it/DELOS/WORKSHOP/Tirakis.html). Greece, Germany, Italy, and France are the partners. The National Film Preservation Foundation (URL: http://lcweb.loc.gov/film) is a consequence of recently passed legislation by the U.S. Congress creating an independent, non-profit, public–private partnership to benefit the film preservation efforts of American film archives, historical societies, and similar institutions. The site has an extensive set of links to international film archives, including Canadian sites. Regarding film, the National Film Board of Canada and Cinémathèque québécois have readily available collections and easily accessible
Web sites. Several major collecting, information, and distribution organizations in the audiovisual field are referred to on The Preservation Trust.ca site (URL: http://www.avpreservationtrust.ca); more about this organization will be described later. The sheer number of organizations and Web sites calls for some co-ordination and single window access. A survey of 1,402 collecting organizations in Canada done by the federal task force in 1994-95 was based on an initial list of 3,600. Of the 426 respondents, including both cultural institutions and industrial organizations, half reported collections containing all three media: audio recordings, video tapes, and film (Canada, 1995). With respect to preservation and accessibility, the following findings are revealing:

1. 78 percent of the respondents had no film copying facilities;
2. 50 percent had no video copying facilities;
3. 36 percent had no sound copying facilities;
4. over 41 percent used only manual description;
5. 8 percent had no descriptions of holdings; and
6. one-third of the holdings were not available to the public. (Canada, 1995, p. 11)

The only conclusion to this all-too-brief consideration of availability and accessibility is that collecting organizations are numerous and unco-ordinated and that “there is no single focal point accessible on the Internet where users can launch searches for information about audiovisual records” (URL: http://www.avpreservationtrust.ca).

**Action taken**

To meet these problems, action has started on several fronts. Throughout this essay I have referred to the federal task force on audiovisual collections. The report, *Fading Away* (1995) is available at URL: http://www.avpreservationtrust.ca. The report’s 20 recommendations placed an emphasis on,

a collective, community approach that fosters shared responsibility, cooperation and decentralized authority ... [to promote] an integrated, holistic view of the management of heritage holdings that considers the full cycle from creation, to identification as part of the country’s heritage, to physical preservation and user access. (Canada, 1995, p. 1, emphasis added)

The notion of a “collective, community approach” rested on the assumption that the variety of stakeholders concerned with audiovisual archiving and use had to be brought together to solve the problems at hand. Following the completion of the task force’s mandate, this was met in the launching of the Alliance for Canada’s Audio-Visual Heritage in June 1996. The Alliance, later to be named “The AV Preservation Trust,” is composed of major stakeholders in the corporate and public domains, including producers, archivists, users, and collection managers. Since its inception it has struggled, with some success, to make a dent in the problems associated with the restoration and preservation of and access to audio-visual records. A formidable barrier to rapid progress has been the lack of finan-
cial support from the private sector and membership support from users. Certainly there has been some support. The National Archives of Canada has invested and continues to invest innumerable employee hours in the project. Federal agencies, including the National Archives, Heritage Canada, the National Film Board, the CBC, and others, have provided financial support sufficient to keep the project alive. Private sector organizations, including V-Tape, TMN: The Movie Network, and the Canadian Recording Industry Association, have provided considerable support. TMN and the National Film Board of Canada have invested considerably in the restoration of key films. However, much more support is required.

An examination of the AV Preservation Trust’s Web site (URL: http://www.avpreservationtrust.ca) provides a description of the Trust and its work, including its new Masterworks program. The Masterworks program recognizes 12 culturally significant classics each year drawn from the archives of the Canadian film, radio, television, video, and sound recording industries. The selected works will have received critical and popular acclaim in their field and will possess unique cultural value in the opinion of the nominating and selection juries. The Masterworks program provides necessary funding to underwrite restoration and preservation costs in order to ensure that designated masterworks are preserved for the enjoyment of future generations (URL: http://www.avpreservationtrust.ca). Site visitors are invited to view the current list of masterwork selections in radio, sound recordings, and film. Descriptions and abstracts accompany each item, along with photo images. The program is designed to attract funds from the private sector, and that it may do. Funds, in turn, will permit the Trust to pursue its major objectives regarding preservation and access.

Of special interest to researchers is a project to design a single focal point accessible on the Internet where users can launch searches for information about audio-visual works: “searches will be directed to databases maintained by a network of participating collecting institutions, organizations and companies. Where possible, information about rights holders would be linked to this system (AV Preservation Trust, 1997, pp. 1-2). The report outlining this particular project, Search & Replay, may be downloaded from the Trust’s Web site. If sufficient funds are acquired and sufficient interest is shown within the “user community,” the project will meet two of the major problems facing communications researchers in search of audiovisual records. It will provide the much needed “single window” from which to conduct searches through the complex of audiovisual archive sites and it will assist in linking researchers with copyright holders. There is welcome evidence of the beginnings of this project on the site. Single window access to seven major collections is provided via the “search and collections” button. Four of these sites (i.e., the National Library, the National Archives, the National Film Board, and Glenbow Museum) are of value to communications researchers and have perhaps already been used by many. The site does demonstrate the value of single window access, though some expansion is required.

Actions have been taken to meet the variety of problems identified. However, the problems referred to above and of direct concern to researchers remain, not-
withstanding the valiant efforts to date on the part of the AV Preservation Trust. To these we now turn in conclusion.

**Conclusion**

Six major points demanding serious attention on the part of the research community have been identified:

- acquiring the resources required to restore and preserve audiovisual records calls for considerable support;
- issues of copyright, the resulting cost of access to records, and the necessity of easy access to owners of copyrighted records calls for consideration and input from researchers;
- selection criteria used by major archival agencies in the process of managing records requires input;
- in the process of the selection of audiovisual records for preservation, attention must be given to the “paper trail”;
- researchers require assistance with access, perhaps from their professional associations, to identify collections in private and certain public agencies; and
- single window access to major and minor collections alike, combined with a search mechanism for locating copyright owners, in effect, a production registry, is an absolute necessity.

I begin with the assumption that the AV Preservation Trust is the one viable vehicle available to the research community through which researchers may influence the course of events regarding Canadian audiovisual records and through which they may meet some of their requirements for data preservation, storage, and access related to their work and the work of their students. To return to “the archival process,” researchers can support, through direct participation in the Trust as individual members, the lobbying efforts in both the public and private sectors to acquire sufficient funds for the retrieval and restoration of rapidly disappearing audiovisual records. Researchers can support the call for funds for the preservation and storage of the vast amount of material in production at any one moment. More important for the immediate needs of researchers is to push for the availability and accessibility of existing records. The Trust’s proposal for single-window access and a voluntary production registry system is crucial in this regard.

This latter project can certainly be facilitated through individual participation in the Trust. Nevertheless, it is of such importance that researchers should convince their professional associations (e.g., the Canadian Communication Association, the Canadian Historical Society, the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, and the like) to make representation via the Social Science and Humanities Federation (of which they are all members) and L’Association Canadienne-française pour l’avancement des sciences to the AV Preservation Trust in order to clearly articulate the needs of researchers, faculty and students alike. This
should include a clear articulation of the researchers’ need for the preservation of related paper documents, a need not close to the interests of the Trust. On several occasions over the past six years, the Trust has made its objectives known to the Canadian Communication Association and the Social Science and Humanities Federation at their annual meetings but, unfortunately, there was very little response from the academic community. The apathy is somewhat surprising given the importance of archival records to social science and humanities research. Now is the time to act.

References