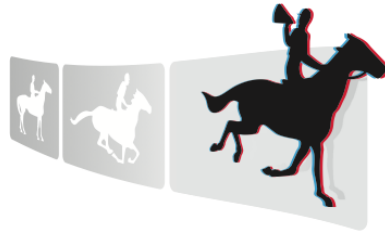


KEEPING AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT ALIVE



PRESTO
CENTRE

Tutorial: Mapping your AV collection



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Introduction

When creating a preservation strategy for your collection, the first thing you need to know is what is in your collection and on your shelves. A collection map is the most logical way to visualise this.

The map is not a catalogue. It is not about each individual item, but about each type of item. The groups of items can then be appraised and evaluated, and a strategy to preserve them can be created.

The collection map is an important starting point for your preservation strategy and successively for your preservation plans. Creating a complete and thorough map will help you throughout the whole preservation process. Investing time and energy at this point will help you later on.

1. Division by type

The first step is to decide how to divide the collection into types. The goal is preservation, so divide the collection into categories that have distinct preservation requirements.

The obvious place to start is with physical formats: the different kinds of physical media. Basically, you can start by dividing the collection according to the machine used to play an item. This would separate film from videotape, and separate U-Matic from Beta SP – but it would not separate 5" reels of 6mm audio tape recordings from 10" reels because both would play on the same machine.

After dividing the collection in physical format types, there are other criteria for preservation in which the format types can be (sub)divided, such as age.

If you have materials from a range of ages (such as 1980 to 1985) then it would be very useful to know how many items from each year. If you have separate age ranges (such as audiotape from the 1950's, and also from the 1980's), then consider breaking up the physical format into age types.

Another way to divide materials is by its history of storage. Possibly some parts of your collection have been stored in an archive (with climate control) for most of their life, and others have been stored in home or office conditions for most of their life. Again, it would make sense to divide such a physical format into two storage types: controlled storage vs. non-controlled storage. Content is also an important criteria when map-

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ping your collection. Under the term genre we create a set of types according to content. Typically types are: fiction/non-fiction, news, entertainment, documentary, drama. Again, the goal is to simplify and organise the decisions about preservation. There is no need to preserve material of no value. So the label 'genre' is really for anything about the value of the content.

2. Evaluation of content

Once the types have been decided, the next step is to evaluate the collection – get information on each type.

- Divide the whole collection into physical format types.
- Count the number of items in each format type (counting shelves is the usual method).
- While counting shelves (step 2), estimate the age of each type – not the age of each item.
- Where necessary, you will already have subdivided the format type into age groups (ie 1950's audiotape and 1980's audiotape), so while counting shelves, estimate the number of items in each age group, for each format.

- Another task while counting shelves is to subdivide the format type by storage conditions (controlled storage vs. non-controlled storage).

So far, we've made a big assumption – that your materials are already arranged on shelves divided according to physical format, age and storage history. If this is roughly true, the mapping becomes a shelf-counting exercise.

If your materials are not divided this way – for instance if material of different ages is on the same shelves – then you need other ways to get the information needed. Possibly age information is in your catalogue. Possibly everything you need to know for preservation is in your catalogue (in which case you are unique, because general experience is that preservation work exposes everything that isn't in the catalogue!).

If your shelves don't divide nicely by format, age and storage history (simultaneously), it may be necessary to count shelves more than once, separately for each relevant factor (like age or storage history).

Evaluate the content: divide by genre, or whatever types you are using that relate to content rather than to format, age and condition. This appraisal should be possible working strictly from the catalogue – though it has to be cross-referenced to the other information (format, age, storage history, condition) which again is where catalogues tend to be frustrating. Possibly the value or genre appraisal can also be done by 'shelf counting'.

3. Appraising physical condition

Now comes the crucial part: appraising physical condition. Here you will probably have to use sampling, because it would take far too much time and money to test every item. Alternatively you may have information already, from your own experience or from the experience of users of the collection.

The basic task is to estimate the degree of playback difficulty, and the life expectancy, for each grouping. If possible, that means for every physi-

cal format, and for every division that you made according to age and storage history. Testing by genre shouldn't be relevant, because playback and life expectancy depend upon physical factors, not on the content.

Test the physical condition in two parts:

- Test whether an individual item plays first try.
- If it does not, record how much effort in hours (cleaning, baking, trying other equipment) is needed to make it play.
- Assess the general condition and life expectancy. For acetate-based materials there is a simple method to check the acetic acid level and predict life expectancy¹.

The result of this exercise is a new description of your collection. It is largely a physical picture (except for the genre / value information), it is based on a small number of categories rather than on individual items, and it supports decisions about how to proceed with preservation work. The new description arranges the categories in a priority order and helps you proceed with preservation category by category – a divide and conquer approach.

A map is a simple idea, and a basic map is straightforward. When the categories are not clear, 'border disputes' can arise or categories may have to be subdivided.

Since physical format and physical condition are the important features of a preservation map, technical knowledge is required. Knowledge about formats, their players, their histories, and about availability, operation and repair of equipment all are relevant. Format obsolescence is one reason for doing preservation work, and so there has to be knowledge about which formats are obsolete and which will soon be obsolete.

Example map from the BBC Ektachrome film collection:

Format	Age	Storage	Genre/value	Condition
16mm B&W film negatives	1950 to 1970	archive; uncirculated	Unique master material	good
16mm Ektachrome	1968 to 1982	office for first 5 yrs, then archive	News; high re-use	some colour fade
16mm B&W film prints	1950 to 1970	archive	No permanent value: use negatives instead	fair: have been circulated
16m mag sound track	1950 to 1980	archive	Masters	vinegar syndrome!
16m mag sound track	1950 to 1980	archive	Duplicates; no permanent value	vinegar syndrome!

As you can see, this film collection has been divided into five parts for the purposes of preservation decisions.

This data is based on a subset of the BBC's film holdings. It does not cover 35mm film or even 16mm colour film apart from Ektachrome, neither does it cover other complexities of film like "A-B rolls" and "internegs". So it is really a corner of the BBC film map, which has other maps for audio and video materials. As you can see, the format "16m mag sound track" was divided into two types: masters and dupes. This was recorded under genre, because the essential difference was one of value: a duplicate is of little value providing there is a good master.

What the map shows is that the 16mm B&W collection had to be divided into four parts: negatives, prints, sound track masters and sound track duplicates. For investment in preservation, the value table was used to decide to do nothing about prints and sound track copies – and concentrate on the other two categories. Immediate action was then taken on the vinegar syndrome materials, but further action on the B&W negatives was deferred. A detailed map would include life-expectancy estimates for the B&W negatives, showing how much time is available before further preservation actions are mandatory.

4. Map your resources

The map of the collection divides the preservation territory into manageable pieces. Before planning a strategy for the collection and for the preservation work (one or more preservation projects), there is more basic information to gather. Now that there is a map for the collections, information is needed on what resources are available. The map will have identified preservation needs – so now the issue is preservation resources. This won't be shelf counting, but it could be head counting – and looking at finances.

One of the biggest choices in planning preservation is the decision about which work to do in-house, and what needs to be done under contract with a service provider.

There is a chicken and egg problem here. You don't need a lot of internal resources if a contractor does the work – but in order to make that decision you do need to know what could be attempted in-house.

The following are the basic categories to consider when gathering information on the ability of your archive to undertake preservation work, whether in-house or contracted:

- **Metadata**

An archive runs on its catalogue. The mapping has already shown the importance of data about the collection. If the catalogue or database shows age, storage history, information

about storage history, and user or operator feedback about physical condition and quality, then mapping can be done just from the database itself, without walking around the shelves counting everything.

Similarly, if material is bar-coded, and already identified to minimum cataloguing standards, the preservation work will progress efficiently. If not, then time, effort and material will be lost. Finally, if the metadata is missing or not up to the standards used in the organisation for everything else, then completion of metadata should be an essential part of preservation work, adding to the time and cost estimates.

- **Staff**

Technical staff to operate equipment, cataloguing staff, logistics staff to find and move media and management are all necessary to make your preservation project run smoothly. If you are a one-person archive, then your time has to stretch to all these activities.

- **Equipment**

In-house preservation work needs equipment: for cleaning old formats, for playing old formats, for writing / printing new formats. A key issue in videotape transfers is headlife: whether there are enough heads (or a reliable source of reconditioned heads) to play however many hundreds or thousands of hours of material to be transferred. For many archives around the world, there is currently (2006) a worrying shortage of equipment for playback of audio DAT recordings.

Contracted preservation work needs less equipment, but there still may be a need for players for checking as part of quality control.

- **Facilities**

You need a place to do the work.

- **Logistics**

People and transport for finding and moving media are required, and (for transfers) for taking old material out of the collection and introducing new material.

- **Existing funding**

A surprisingly important issue in funding preservation is the accounting procedure. If your collection already has space, staff and equipment that are not fully occupied, a small amount of preservation work can be 'kept off the books' because the true costs are invisible (to the accounting process).

This form of 'preservation for free' is attractive, but it can be a fatal attraction. If the work required exceeds the resources available, material will be lost. Further, it is hard to get financial approval for doing the required work at a certain price – if it is possible to do a fraction of that work effectively for free. The 'invisible accounting' limits the ability to properly plan and fund a comprehensive preservation project.

Conclusion

With your collection map, you have taken the most important first step in thinking about preservation. You now know what you have in your collection and how urgent taking action is. It will be easier to convince people of the need for preservation with your collection map in hand.

Using this map, you can continue working on your preservation plans by first creating a preservation strategy and then creating concrete plans for preservation projects.

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¹ See <http://preserve.harvard.edu/pubs/acetatefilm.pdf>

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