

# BROADCAST ARCHIVES: SELECTION AND PRIORITY SETTING

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Broadcasters create vast quantities of images and sounds, only a selection of which ever gets to air. Then, only a selection of *that* is consciously retained over time for preservation. And the survival of what *is* kept faces the long term uncertainties of changing economic conditions, station policies, internal culture, obsolescence and physical/ chemical deterioration. One definition of archiving is that it is a constant battle to protect the assets of the past from the deprivations of the present.

A key part of the battle, which positions the archivist for everything that happens afterwards, is *selection*: consciously choosing what images and sounds to keep and knowing *why* ...deliberately and not randomly.

## *Selection always happens*

Selection always happens, deliberately or by default – through coincidence, neglect, deterioration or technical change. The variables you can reasonably control are *how* and *why* it happens.

Deliberate selection is an curatorial, intellectual process. One makes historical, commercial, social, technical and practical judgments. Why keep this program and not that one? Do you keep individual programs as such, or select parts of the streamed output of the station – commercials, station breaks and all?

It is best by far for selection to be conscious and deliberate – and seen to be so. It positions the archive and the archivist most effectively for the preservation battles which will follow. It sends messages about the worth of corporate assets and use of resources, it asserts values and it influences internal culture and decision making.

## *Priority setting always happens*

Setting priorities – deciding on the most important tasks to address first - is selection in practice. Not only can you not do everything at once, you probably can't do everything – period! So what gets priority? Acquisition? Preservation? What's most urgent?

## *Collection development policy*

The foundation of effective selection and acquisition is a written policy that is both *promulgated* - within the station or network and perhaps also publicly - and *observed in practice*. Your constituency needs to know what you *say* you are doing and be confident that you *are* doing it in practice. (Policies that read well but aren't followed invite cynicism and devalue archiving.)

Elements of a good selection policy include:

- A statement of vision, mandate or goals – what are you trying to achieve, under what authority and for whose benefit?

- Invocation of external reference points, such as statements of standards or principles established by UNESCO or professional associations like SEAPAVAA, IASA, FIAT/IFTA and SMPTE.
- A statement of philosophy: do you subscribe to a code of ethics? Do you serve a public or internal clientele? What are your technical standards?
- A statement of scope: do you keep only in-house production or do you cast a wider net? (Good arguments can be mounted either way)
- A statement of relationships and responsibility. With what other archival bodies do you cooperate/ share tasks, and what is your national responsibility (if any)?
- Intellectual criteria for selection: are you keeping material for its intrinsic significance (historical record, national identity, personalities, places, artistic merit) and/or for commercial and production value (re-broadcast, re-purposing, re-use, products). Again, there are UNESCO and other external guidelines.
- Technical criteria for selection: originals and/or copies? Compressed or uncompressed files? Do you set minimum technical standards and specifications?
- Do you have subordinate guidelines specific to genres? For example, do you keep every episode of a long series or serial, every newscast and current affairs program, every phone-in chat show? If not, why not?

Collection development means *de-selection* when necessary as well as *selection*.

### ***Acquisition***

Acquisition follows selection, and involves the support of station management to ensure that you do acquire what you select, and don't just end up with what's left over when the production team is finished. It's an active, not a passive, process.

### ***Preservation priorities***

A definition of preservation is the totality of things necessary to ensure the permanent accessibility – forever – of an audiovisual document with the maximum integrity<sup>1</sup>. It's a never ending task. Nothing has ever *been* preserved – it is only *being* preserved.

The most immediate preservation issue for broadcast archivists is the digitization of increasingly obsolescent analog carriers. How does one prioritise the task?

We turn to the military concept of triage. Every collection can be divided into three parts: (a) material beyond recovery (b) recoverable material requiring urgent attention (c) material not requiring urgent attention.

*Material beyond recovery* includes physically deteriorated tapes from which a signal can't be extracted, or obsolete formats which can no longer be reproduced. On the face of it, such material can be discarded. But be careful: even if *your* station can no longer play an old format, there may be archives which can, and the content may be worth saving.

*Recoverable material requiring urgent attention* applies to carriers most under threat from age and obsolescence. Usually (not always) these are analog tapes! Are they still treatable and in reasonable condition? How long will the playback technology be available? How labour intensive will a good digital transfer be? Is there enough time and means to transfer all the material or will

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<sup>1</sup> Edmondson, Ray: *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles* UNESCO, Paris, 2004, page 20

there need to be a curatorial selection based on significance of content? Can the material be ranked in an order of urgency, based on these factors?

*Material not requiring urgent attention* will, at this point, include many analog carriers which are in good shape, well stored, and which will have playback technology still available for some years to come. It will also include non-magnetic formats like film and vinyl discs which, if well stored, are very stable and will be reproducible for the foreseeable future. There is no point in the premature transfer of such material for *preservation* – indeed, there may be needless expense and quality loss.

Overlaying the triage, though, will be the ongoing demands of access, which will cut across priorities. Try to anticipate this and factor it in.

### ***Dilemmas***

Setting priorities is not easy. For example, if you had resources to preserve *only one* of the following, which would you choose?

- Television pictures of the first moon walk
- Amateur footage of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy
- Radio coverage of the 1986 “people power” revolution in the Philippines
- Television footage of the December 2004 tsunami across S E Asia
- The World Trade Centre collapse on 9 September 2001

### ***Closing thoughts***

- Obsolescence is characteristic of audiovisual media. Digital files have the highest obsolescence rate of all.
- Selection is imperfect. We can’t see today with the eyes of the tomorrow, and we need to maximize – not minimize - future options. We’ll sometimes be wrong, yet our choices will shape that future.

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