

Sound Preservation and Research: The Precarity of Digital Archives

Katherine Quanz, University of Wisconsin-Madison

I research sound, which means that my object of study is invisible and ephemeral. Of course, recordings preserve sounds, enabling us to play them back at will, and when specific technology becomes obsolete, we can transfer the sound to an alternative format. As many others suggest, however, we can lose important acoustical information in this process. Because the topic of format obsolescence has been discussed eloquently elsewhere, this position paper will focus instead on challenges to preserving digitized recordings in terms of cost, copyright and user access, and the necessity for an open dialog between researchers and archivists.

It is often assumed that digital storage is cheaper, more compact, and longer lasting than analogue formats. This general misconception, however, puts archival collections at risk. Digitizing media is a costly endeavor because it involves hiring or training staff, shipping delicate and irreplaceable media to vendors, and then storing the digital files in perpetuity. Last year I attended an archival conference where one of the hottest topics of discussion was digital storage. Presenters offered tips for limiting soaring costs, but the reality is that it is difficult to stretch archival budgets to include cloud storage. While most archives try to incorporate some digitization efforts into their current operating plans, large scale projects often require grants and years of planning.

Next, there is often conflation between digitization and online access. In general, most donor agreements enable the archive to make the materials available onsite, regardless of the format. But due to copyright and privacy issues, archivists need to be careful when deciding what materials to make available online. Most collections contain some sensitive information and the onus is on the archivists to ensure that no individual's rights are violated by changing the access to archival material. The result is that most archives take a conservative approach to making their digitized collections available online. This means that evidence supporting an accepted historical point-of-view is more likely to be shared online as there is less risk involved.

Additionally, archivists and researchers should discuss the digitization process and what restoration techniques have been applied to the materials. For instance, sometimes noise is removed from the audio file in order to make the content audible. Generally the original transfer is preserved and it could then be made available for research, if requested. Similarly, a familiarity with the provenance of a collection can help researchers understand why some materials are not available.

While digitizing materials is fraught with obstacles, such as the shifting of formats, the current issues of preservation also present opportunities for collaborations with researchers to clarify appraisal decisions. In relation to media, it is helpful for archivists

to converse with scholars to gain a sense of the questions that are being asked. For example, materials that detail below-the-line labor (such as film dailies, sound recordist notes, camera roll logs, temporary edits, and mixing cue sheets) are often left out of archives. While this is generally because the materials were not donated, sometimes these materials are weeded because their value to archivists is not apparent. Thus, explaining our needs as researchers helps archivists understand the types of materials we find useful so that they can preserve the materials we need. Such collaborations not only aid archivists in making informed appraisal choices, but also help researchers understand why appraisal decisions are made. In an ideal world, these collaborations would lead to successful grant-applications for further preservation.