

# **Latin American Observatory of Sound and Audio-visual Archives**

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## **Introduction**

News, paradigm-shifting ideas, social movements, scientific discoveries and artistic creations have all been documented through audiovisual recordings. These recordings have, more than any other medium, created social memory, documented contemporary history and now form part of our Intangible Cultural Heritage. The only way to guarantee the permanence of content recorded on analogue audio-visual media is to digitize it (Bradley, 2006). For this reason, the race against time to digitize the largest number of recordings possible began around the end of the last century. The purpose is combating their technological obsolescence and material degradation as well as offering better access to these materials.

Digitization has been a priority task for institutions that safeguard sound and audio-visual memory ever since. Vast economic resources have been invested to create digitization projects. In Europe, the amount of documents that should be digitized and the urgency to act quickly to avoid their loss, motivated the creation of projects such as Presto (2000-2002), which evolved into Presto Space (2004-2008) and then to Presto PRIME (2009-2012) (Addis, Bailer, Boch, Gallo and Wright, 2010; Teruggi, 2006 and 2009). Presto was an important platform in the support of digitization initiatives, as well as for the creation of digital preservation platforms. In the United States, a diagnosis of the state of the art in the preservation of sound documents (Bamberger and Brylawsky, 2010) defined the preservation state of these kinds of collections and calculated the needs of digitization in public institutions and universities. In Japan, for more than a decade the digitization of radio collections and television shows of the Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK) has been a task aimed at reuse in educational and audio-visual production (Ehara, Manabu, 2006).

In addition, the scientific and professional community interested in digital preservation has been focusing on creating standards, norms, policies and international guidelines to establish digital long-term preservation formats, conceptual models of open archives, and metadata models that identify content from the moment of its creation until it is recovered by users as well as lay the foundations for the interoperability and security plans for digital storage, amongst others.

However, the risk of loss of sound and audio-visual heritage is a latent problem. The loss rate of sound and audio-visual heritage is greater than the progress in digitization. In the year 2030, when 33% of the content will have been digitized, 67% will remain useless (Wright, 2011). It is likely that in the next decade an important part of audio-visual and sound heritage will be lost (Schüller, 2008, NFSA, 2015). This situation will be more dramatic for countries that have not yet undertaken digitization projects.

### **Risk of Loss in Latin America**

In Latin America the risk of loss is high due to the lack of economic resources, inadequate storage conditions, extreme weather with excessive temperatures and humidity, lack of trained personnel to tend to the collections, equipment obsolescence, political instability and absence of public policies that protect this heritage.

In Latin America, sound and moving image archives began to be discussed in academia at the end of the last century. In 1999, the training course *Creation and Management of Audio-visual Image Banks* was organized, sponsored by The Organization of American States (OAS) in the Educational Television Training Center (CETE) of Mexico. Ten Latin American countries participated in this training course (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Peru, Venezuela and Mexico). Then, in 2001, Radio Educación, public radio of México, and the International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT/IFTA) organized the First International Seminar on Sound and Audio-visual Archives in Mexico. Two years later, in Colombia, the

Seminar Census and evaluation of unpublished ethnographic audio and audio-visual documents recorded in the Andean countries took place (Bonnemason, B. Genouvès, V. and Pèrennou, V, 2007). Since then, forums, seminars and academic conferences have been held in different countries and, thanks to these, a critical body of sound and audio-visual archives has been created.

However, in Latin America, the amount and status of audio-visual heritage is unknown. There are no diagnoses that account for the state of preservation of this type of material in the region. In 2003 a survey was conducted in the ethnographic archives of Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru and Venezuela, which showed that the archives lacked conservation conditions, databases, budget and policies to guide their work (IFEA, 2003). In this period, international actions in favor of audio-visual heritage had an impact on Latin America (UNESCO, 2003, FIAT, 2004) and the presence of experts from the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) and IFTA) contributed to raise awareness of the risk of loss of this heritage. Largely thanks to these efforts, projects were undertaken to digitize collections and create institutions to safeguard this type of material (Rodríguez, 2015). Digitization was used as a political flag and with it, funds could be obtained to digitize some collections. Projects were undertaken in public institutions and in the media in countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and Peru, among others. Even though the first steps to digitize have been taken, there are still important collections that are at risk of being lost in the coming years.

Digitization is merely the tip of the iceberg of a series of transformations facing sound and audio-visual archives. Institutions that have managed to digitize their collections run into another problem: they face the challenge of the sustainable digital preservation of their collections. Digitized documents accumulate and thus their administration, management, storage and access becomes more difficult. In addition, digital documents increasing the size of the archive. The long-term conservation of and access to digital content is the most important challenge for archives today. Unfortunately, in Latin America the absence of continuity of economic resources, lack of trained personnel, public policies and technological

infrastructure to ensure the permanence of collections for the future, cause that digitized materials remain at risk.

In each country the situation is quite different. The conditions of preservation are associated with social, political, economic and even cultural conditions. In the safeguarding of memory institutions, the common denominator is that the continuity of digitization and digital preservation initiatives depends in turn on the political will of the government.

### **The Latin American Observatory**

Information obtained in countries where studies and research to identify the quantity and conditions of safeguarding of sound and audio-visual documents have been promoted is now the basis to implement digitization and sustainable digital preservation infrastructure. In contrast, in countries where research and studies are lacking, the risk of losing content increases. It is unknown where the main music libraries, video libraries, sound or audio-visual archives are. There is, among other variables, a lack of information regarding the quantity, supports, conservation conditions, copyright and uniqueness of the collections.

The Latin American Observatory of Sound and Audiovisual Archives is a project to contribute to the task of safeguarding the continent's audio-visual heritage.

The purpose of this project is to identify and value the main sound and audio-visual collections of Latin American countries and offer structured information in relation to the digital preservation of audio-visual collections in the region. In this way, we seek to encourage the creation of collaboration networks among researchers in the region.

Digitization, in the coming years, should be a selective process because it will unfortunately be impossible to digitize everything. Latin American organisations do not have the money, the technology and the trained personnel to carry out mass digitization. We must choose what to digitize first, using social, cultural, historical, rarity and uniqueness criteria. In order to execute this task, we must first know the collections and the conditions under which they are stored. In this

task, the Observatory could be a tool that contributes to the identification of materials at risk through research.

Therefore, a first stage of the Observatory is to identify the audio-visual archives in the region and to know the preservation state of the analog and born born-digital collections.

We are working with a questionnaire to identify the unique and more valuable collections preserved in public radio and television broadcast organizations; universities and research centers; national archives, libraries and museums, and institutions.

A questionnaire will be sent around to investigate the status of sound and audio-visual collections in risk. We try to work with researchers from different countries interested in joining the project.

The questionnaire has been applied in 15 institutions in Mexico and it established contacts to start work in Uruguay, Colombia and Brazil. The results will feed into articles and research reports that will be published by the Observatory. It is a titanic task because resources are scarce.

We also need to work in the creation of a Digital Preservation Network with researchers from the region. Latin American Universities have shown an interest to participate in networks around this topic.

We know that this is a small step because the digital preservation of digitized collections is a major challenge that involves the creation of digital archives to preserve the content for the long term.

The Observatory also seeks to raise awareness of the urgency of launching programs aimed at protecting the at-risk Latin American audio-visual heritage among the public and those in charge of memory institutions. This is an initiative that arose from the academic and research sector, thanks to the collaborative effort between the Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliotecológicas y de la Información (IIBI) de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). In addition, the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) and the International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT/IFTA) have been invited to join this project.

Another aspect of the Observatory is that all the information will be in Spanish. In this regard, it seeks to fill the gap that exists in current publications about this topic.

## **Takeaways and Discussion**

The digital preservation of sound and audio-visual archives is uneven. While around the world there are institutions that have undertaken digitization projects and creation of digital archives, in other regions such as Latin America the risk of loss is a latent concern. It is likely that over the next decade the percentage of loss that has been estimated will increase in the Latin American countries.

Political, economic, social and cultural conditions affect preservation initiatives and determine the continuity or conclusion of the projects. In order to combat this situation, it is necessary to promote collaborative initiatives aimed at the protection of analogue and digital audio-visual heritage. As an alternative to this need, the creation of the Latin American Observatory of Sound and Audio-visual Archives is proposed as a digital platform to identify, value and draw up joint actions aimed at safeguarding this heritage.

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