

Isabelle Giannattasio
Directeur
Département de l'Audiovisuel
Bibliothèque nationale de France

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Janus attitude

How should a national audiovisual archive handle both past and future ?

When I proposed to give a paper entitled “Janus attitude” in Riga IASA Conference, I had in mind the image of the Roman god, represented with a double-face head, looking to the past and to the future. As Janus, we have to face both past and future : isn't it the traditional task of an archivist in charge of building heritage collections and preserving them for the future ?

Who is Janus ? Wikipedia, the free and participative encyclopedia, explains that Janus was the god of gates, doors, doorways, beginnings, and endings. A little Google research leads to others senses for the word Janus : a VOD web site, a videogame web community. Several software applications are named Janus, as a new Digital Rights Management Microsoft application able to control the delivery of audio and video files on mobile telephones. This is just to illustrate the new context changing our Janus-like job.

The digital era gives us new duties and also new opportunities to reconsider our four missions : collect, catalogue, preserve and give access to documents.

Preservation was the first mission affected. Endangered carriers found in digitization the way to be copied. Copies able to be recopied themselves without loss. Copies to be preserved by successive migrations. Industrial processes have emerged. We were able to launch large scale preservation plans. For instance at BnF, we are achieving digitisation of all magnetic carriers, 20% of the collection, i.e 200 000 documents. Our heritage institution status gave us the duty and fortunately the possibility to save these kind of documents. Fragility of carriers, obsolescence of reading equipment condemn many documents to death. An other danger is software obsolescence : we also receive all multimedia and electronic publications, such as video games, which can not be replayed on new equipment. For that, we use emulation process.

Such dangers have an impact on **enriching collections**. It seems a paradox. As many collection owners realize that their collections are condemned, and not all of them have public or private money to save them, they propose giving them to us. But we cannot accept to save all of them, as to accept a gift is to assume a cost.

It can be considered as a “**retrospective legal deposit**”, as we call deposits made by publishers or producers several years after publishing the document. These past years, we have received many deposits from institutional producers or distributors, as they understood that legal deposit in BnF, was the way to preserve their catalogue, their image, their activity.

And of course to preserve the works themselves, which would have otherwise been lost, even for the rights owner themselves. For instance, Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir. Mouvement français du planning familial, Legal deposit status gives us the duty, and the right to reproduce, in order to preserve. The definition of legal deposit is extensive : any document delivered to the public, whether general or specific, has to be deposited. But we have to be aware to define a legitimate perimeter, as we say, “all legal deposit, only legal deposit”. “All legal deposits” : not all the collection owners know that legal deposit can preserve their collections. We try to publicize what we do, and we are very active in finding forgotten and hidden endangered collections, such as video art, as “video militante”. “Only legal deposit”: we do not want to (and we cannot) act as a “free lab and repository”, and we have to refuse deposits.

Outside of legal deposit, notably for unpublished documents such as oral history, ethnological and musical recordings, musical performances, we consider **acquisitions**. And for that, we established a Collection Development Policy. In this framework, we receive donations. In this context, donors give us carriers, and ask for a copy of what we have digitized. We establish a convention, in order to complement the “manual donation” with legal dispositions, and precisions about copy delivery. BnF acquires the non commercial rights, to use in its premises. For instance, we received from Orchestre de Paris concerts registrations, and ethnomusical archives from Deben Bhattacharya and Shima Arom. In these cases of unpublished documents donations, we receive the original carriers, to be preserved in appropriate conditions in our stocks, even though we know that they probably will be unusable in the long term. We can also receive “only” the content. This was recently the case of the French composer, Pierre Henry : Pierre Henry will entrust his work to BnF, in order to be preserved. It means that the contents will be digitized, and preserved in a long term repository. The carriers will be returned to him.

Digital Janus has collected the past and transmitted it to the future. But Janus has also to collect the future, really already present today, and even already past : I mean of course the web. We know that Internet is becoming a major media to deliver, to exchange, all kinds of documents and services, and a new media itself. We acted to extend legal deposit to the web, and we are experimenting three ways to collect the web : broad crawls, selective crawls, and deposit. This is a major challenge

After collecting and preserving, **giving access to documents**. The digital era leads to the assumption of immediately giving access on the web. But some questions arise.

What can we deliver ? We know very well, in audiovisual collections, that legal restrictions are the first obstacle to be cleared. But, they can be cleared, or at least some of them : documents in the public domain, documents allowed by convention, agreements with rights holding companies

What do we want to deliver ? catalogue ? documents as « data bank » ? which ones ? editorial products ? From several years, IASA members present diverse kinds of on-line catalogue, on-line services.

Maybe, the most worrying issue is the missing faces of Janus, To be aware, the archivist has to have not only two, but four faces, to look at past and future, but also to look to the present all around him. In fact libraries and archives act in a moving, promising, world wide context. In the globalisation of information, sound and audiovisual are at the top of emerging business models, technical offers, and piracy, as they are on the top of uses and requests by the public. Is Music an international language ? From Janus, we have to go turn Buddha, in the Bayon Temple of Angkor

Back to Janus, and to the library. Obviously documents have to be delivered in the library, via an intranet. A new task of the archive can also be to become an institutional repository :

to act as preservation and on line delivery system to other institutions. This is probably a future task for the library. In our IASA group, it is the model of Phonofile. For BnF, it is a request of some possible donors : not to receive a copy, but to have access, via extranet, to our server.

Maybe, to end, we can go back to the four missions. And emphasise the most traditional and old fashioned one : **the catalogue**. The newest word is « metadata ». Years and years of producing bibliographic descriptions and indexing of documents now allow research engines to explore them, when digitized and exposed on the web. But it is not enough (it is never enough) : users now have taken the power, and want a web 2.0, more interactive.

This is Janus, as god of beginnings