Back to analogue: preserving audiovisual resources for digitisation and posterity

Aldis Pūtelis (Institue of Literature, Folklore and Art, Latvia)

Discovering the Material:
Taking inventory of material to be processed

Latviešu folkloras krātuve
or
Archives of Latvian Folklore (ALF)
are a document-oriented archives holding:

- **manuscript** documents (*containing mostly hand-written text*);
- **pictorial** documents (*drawings, photographic images and negatives*);
- **audio** and **video** documents (*phonograph cylinders, tapes. cassettes, VHS and DV format video, digital files*)

The **paper manuscript documents** have been the main aim of the collection and preservation activities by the Archives, as stated in its By-laws approved in **1924**.

The other documentation (including audiovisual) has been considered **supplementary** for decades.

Some important principles

- Archives' purpose is to **preserve** documents it is entrusted with.
- The **preservation** is **not** limited to **safe-keeping** the items.
- The opportunity of **use** of the contents must be ensured.

Substantial portions of ALF's audiovisual documents have been digitised since **2002**.

The **digitised documents** have come into **more use** because of:

- registration in a **digital register** (data base) providing different search options;
- digital formats allowing **access** from any workstation in the office;
- **easy inclusion** in different types of works – from presentations to books and sound compilations.

Digitisation is not an human-independent process.

Decisions have to be made regarding the following:

- **material** to be digitised;
- digital target **formats**;
- **equipment** to be used,
- structure of **data** base to employ.

But the very **first** decision to be made:

whether to digitise **in-house** or **outsource** the service.

In either case it is necessary to be fully aware of:

- **amount** of material (*total **duration** of sound recordings, **number** of images*, etc.)
- **types** of carriers (*e.g. reel tapes, cassettes, DAT*)
- **situation** of the material (*preservation*)

Even in the case of impossibility to perform **complete digitisation**
of all material preserved

taking inventory of it helps greatly in
• organisation of the digitisation work
as well as
• everyday use of the material as such.

All of the ALF's documents had their *paper-registers*, containing some information regarding the contents.

Creating the **digital register** ALF chose to also add the **technical details** of the material.

The internal data base of ALF is traditionally mostly **item-oriented** (especially in the case of audio documents describing individual songs or narratives).

Although taking inventory is a **much less labour-consuming task** than digitisation itself, in the current funding (and staffing) situation it has not yet been finished.

The digitisation work at ALF was started by transferring the existing data into some **computer-file format**, both MS Access and MS Word.

Widespread formats were chosen with future easy **migration** to a different format in mind.

The originally documented details regarding the tapes were

- number of the tape;
- number of the item;
- the title of the item
- the name of the performer
- location where recorded
- the name of the recordist
- technical quality

The technical details added later in the process:

- the total **length** of the tape (approx.)
- **producer** of the tape
- presence of **leader**-tape
- presence of **splices** between the titles (insertions of leader-tape)
- **type** of the spool
- **size** of the spool

- The images were originally included in the **manuscript** material itself, so they received the regular catalogue number and some description alongside.
- The development of technology granted the opportunity of producing substantial numbers of snapshots, of which part were chosen for inclusion in representative **albums** (*created upon conclusion of a field-work session; containing captions*).
- The rest were kept in **envelopes** (*with little information attached*).

The data about the images included in the data base is as follows:
- **year**,
- **date** (if available)
- original **caption** (if available)
- (known) persons captured
- **location**
- poly**chrom**e/monochrome
- in**doors**/outdoors
- physical **dimensions** of the image.

In case **initial data is lacking** there are problems with the description of the material.

An **audio document** usually contains items that are clearly definable and possesses its aesthetic values, but the information regarding
the performer with regard to
• his/her **location** (*representation of a tradition*),
• **name** (*identification of repertoire*)
• **year** of performance (*estimation of performance qualities*);
recording:
• equipment used,

is of importance for use of the item in **research**.

A pictorial document without sufficient data is nothing more than an **ornament**.

There are ways (of at least attempting) to gather additional information even if the initial field-information is missing.

These are provided by the **world wide web**.
For example, *Flickr Commons (*http://www.flickr.com/commons) provides an opportunity for different archives to publish their images and gather information through the comments of the viewers.

Also, the archives can publish their images on their websites, inviting the viewers to comment.

The same can be achieved regarding the **recorded sound**.

A good example of that:
The project "**Traditional Music in England**" by the British Library
http://sounds.bl.uk/Browse.aspx?category=World-and-traditional-music&collection=Traditional-music-in-England

It offers to add a note in case the listener has some additional information regarding the item.

In either case, though, the **material** itself must be **digitised**.

To benefit from the new opportunities provided by digitised material the person aspiring to use them must **first** perform the tedious but important task of

TAKING INVENTORY

more or less along the lines of the presented before.

A **conclusion** to start a **discussion**.

The different established archives are experiencing different **funding** situations.
Still they are likely to be **able** to preserve their holdings even in the current situation when the multitude of technical formats is rapidly becoming **obsolete**.

But there are quite a few **private** archives (*considered mere home collections of recordings or images by their owners*) that could be of high information value but are in grave danger of being discarded as unusable or being of no interest to those in whose possession these eventually come.

How to preserve or at least (for starters) take inventory of **those**?

Questions and suggestions very welcome.

Aldis Pūtelis
Archives of Latvian Folklore
www.lfk.lv
Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art
www.lulfmi.lv

aldis.putelis@lulfmi.lv