

Challenges and strategies in the preservation of historical and audiovisual archives

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ABSTRACT

The conservation of historical and audiovisual archives is essential for preserving cultural heritage, collective memory, and national identity. These archives—comprising documents, photographs, films, videos, and other materials—serve as critical records of historical events, cultural traditions, and social practices. However, preserving such materials is fraught with challenges, including physical and chemical degradation caused by factors like humidity, temperature, light, and improper handling. Moreover, technological obsolescence poses a significant risk to digital media. To address these issues, conservation efforts must include both the restoration of damaged materials and preventive measures to mitigate future deterioration. This involves not only restoring old photographs and repairing films but also digitizing documents and creating controlled storage environments. Digital conservation, including the migration of obsolete formats to current technologies, is crucial for the longevity of audiovisual materials. Studies highlight various challenges faced in audiovisual preservation. Rasaki et al. (2023) identified obstacles such as technological obsolescence, inadequate storage conditions, lack of funding, insufficient management commitment, and a shortage of trained personnel in a Nigerian university library. Muhammad (2019) further pointed out systemic issues, including the absence of a national preservation policy and undervaluation of audiovisual materials. Evens and Hauttekeete (2011) discussed challenges in digital preservation, noting that underdeveloped policies leave archives vulnerable to deterioration and technological obsolescence. Baker (2021) documented a significant upgrade at the University of Kansas Libraries, showcasing the expansion of conservation facilities and the creation of specialized spaces for audiovisual preservation. Effective preservation requires a collective effort that includes governments, cultural institutions, and public education. Comprehensive preventive measures—such as managing environmental conditions, regulating light exposure, and protecting collections from pollutants and threats—are essential to ensure the accessibility and preservation of valuable cultural heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Audiovisual Preservation, Cultural Heritage, Digital Obsolescence, Preventive Conservation, Conservation Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The conservation of historical and audiovisual archives is crucial for preserving the culture, collective memory, and identity of people worldwide. The challenge of maintaining and protecting documents, photographs, films, videos, and other audiovisual materials is essential to ensure that future generations have access to the cultural and historical heritage that shapes their origins and development.

These archives serve as invaluable testimonies of the past, capturing not only historical events but also cultural traditions, social practices, and the emotional essence of different eras. However, the preservation of such materials is a complex and demanding endeavor. Factors like humidity,

temperature, light, and improper handling can lead to physical and chemical degradation, threatening the integrity of these items. Documents and photographs can deteriorate, films may suffer irreversible damage, and digital media face the risk of technological obsolescence.

To mitigate these risks, the conservation process involves both the restoration of damaged materials and the implementation of preventive measures to prevent future deterioration. This includes restoring old photographs, repairing deteriorated films, digitizing documents, and creating controlled storage environments. Additionally, digital conservation, such as migrating outdated formats to more current technologies, is essential for ensuring the longevity of audiovisual materials.

The preservation of these archives is a shared responsibility, extending beyond governments and cultural institutions to include public education on the importance of conservation. Every preserved item contributes to the broader narrative of a nation's history, making its conservation vital for understanding and valuing our cultural heritage.

Rasaki et al. (2023) conducted a study in a Nigerian university library that identified several significant challenges in audiovisual preservation. The study highlighted obstacles such as technological obsolescence, inadequate storage conditions, lack of funding, insufficient management commitment, and a shortage of trained personnel in audiovisual preservation. These challenges emphasize the urgent need for structural measures and investments to safeguard the audiovisual heritage in the library studied.

Similarly, Muhammad (2019) pointed out critical issues in the management of audiovisual materials in Nigeria, noting systemic problems like the absence of a national policy on preservation, a shortage of trained personnel, technological challenges, and inadequate storage facilities. Additionally, the perception that audiovisual materials are less valuable than other formats further undermines preservation efforts. Muhammad's study offers strategic recommendations, including the development of a national preservation policy, investment in training, and raising awareness of the cultural significance of audiovisual materials.

Evens and Hauttekeete (2011) addressed four key issues that hinder the sustainability of digital preservation in cultural heritage institutions: digitization, metadata indexing, intellectual property rights management, and business models. Their case study on the digitization of audiovisual collections in performing arts institutions in Flanders (Belgium) revealed that most organizations have underdeveloped digital preservation policies, leaving archives vulnerable to deterioration and technological obsolescence. The study underscores the need for robust policies to ensure the long-term sustainability of these valuable collections.

Baker (2021) describes a significant transformation at the University of Kansas (KU) Libraries in 2018, where an outdated basement space was upgraded into a modern conservation lab

designed for library and archival collections. The new lab, located within the special collections and archives library, significantly expanded the available space for conservators and student staff, allowing them to work in proximity to the most vulnerable collection materials. Additionally, rooms were repurposed for audiovisual preservation, creating dedicated spaces for film and video workflows and enhancing an existing audio room. Baker's article offers practical insights into the challenges and successes of the planning process, highlighting lessons learned and unexpected benefits.

Figure 1: Conservation of historical and audiovisual collections.



Source: Smithsonian Institution Archives.

To preserve and ensure continued access to valuable collections, institutions must adopt comprehensive preventive conservation measures. These measures are crucial for maintaining the integrity and longevity of materials, particularly in libraries, archives, and museums where historical and cultural items are stored. Preventive conservation strategies focus on creating and maintaining optimal environmental conditions, managing relative humidity and temperature, regulating light exposure, and protecting collections from pollutants. Providing protective storage enclosures and implementing security measures to safeguard collections from theft, natural disasters, and other threats are also essential components of preventive conservation. These efforts ensure that collections remain accessible and preserved for future generations, safeguarding the cultural heritage they represent.

In conclusion, the conservation of historical and audiovisual archives is an essential practice for safeguarding the cultural heritage and collective memory of nations. The challenges of preservation—ranging from physical and chemical degradation to technological obsolescence—require a comprehensive approach that includes both restoration and preventive measures. The studies by Rasaki et al. (2023), Muhammad (2019), Evens and Hauttekeete (2011), and Baker (2021) highlight the critical need for robust policies, adequate training, and investment in infrastructure to ensure the long-term sustainability of these collections. By addressing these challenges through collaborative efforts and increased awareness, we can protect and preserve the invaluable records of our shared history, ensuring their accessibility for future generations. The responsibility for this preservation extends beyond cultural institutions, demanding a collective commitment to valuing and maintaining the diverse legacies that define our identities.

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