

Round Table Discussion: Revisiting the Magnetic Media Crisis A Decade After the Library of Congress National Recording Preservation Plan

Association of Moving Image Archivists Conference, 2023, Tulsa Oklahoma
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Overview

This summary provides an overview of the round table discussion held Friday, November 17, 2023 at the Association of Moving Image Archivists Conference. In 2012, the [Library of Congress published its National Recording Preservation Plan](#), with the oft-quoted words: “many analog audio recordings must be digitized within the next 15 to 20 years—before sound carrier degradation and the challenges of acquiring and maintaining playback equipment make the success of these efforts too expensive or unattainable.” In the decade since, archivists have been using these numbers to advocate for the preservation not only of audio material, but all magnetic recordings. This round table invited a discussion of the state of magnetic media preservation now that we are halfway through the estimated timeframe for preservation of some formats. Over 50 AMIA members participated in the discussion.

About the Survey, Mapping the Magnetic Media Landscape

This discussion was held in conjunction with the BAVC Media project, [Mapping the Magnetic Media Landscape](#), a year-long survey which will review the state of magnetic media preservation in the United States by surveying 150 organizations, conducting in-depth interviews with collection caretakers, and site visits to organizations. Any organization with a magnetic media collection is invited to participate in the survey by clicking the link above. Our staff is here to walk you through any questions you have about the survey. This project is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Email kellishay@gmail.com with questions or to schedule a phone or video call.

Discussion Objectives

- Identify, discuss, and better understand the biggest concerns of those caring for magnetic media collections who are attending the AMIA conference.
- What training do people want and need the most?
- What is working to further preservation?
- What disparities exist between small and large collections?

Summary of Discussion

Discussion Topic One: Obsolescence of Equipment

- Many participants cited that their biggest concern is the aging of playback machines, getting them repaired, and finding spare parts of obsolete equipment. The discussion centered largely on this challenge.
- Machines are out there, but the problem is repair. Fewer and fewer people are going into that work, there is no formal, consistent training. Discussion participants noted that there is a perception that there is no market for such training, but are unclear if this is true.
- How do we get people trained to repair and service decks? What is the best way?
 - Videos / online: There are many ways to watch repair videos, but we need hands-on training
 - Community colleges who train technicians can collaborate with an archiving program to provide cross training and build networks.
 - Summer program for archivists, like the FIAF summer school
 - Workshops at AMIA
 - Use the Community Archiving Workshop Model for equipment servicing training
 - Use of the BAVC Media online training model
 - Regional events that service equipment
 - Equipment database for sharing equipment or checking it out?
- Even if we train people, if there are fewer and fewer parts. There are 3D printed parts, but are they working? Concern over breaking of these parts. Can we archivists partner with machinists?
 - Indiana University has a machinist shop - are they able to make parts?
- Short term and long term solutions - deal with the current equipment repair crisis now, and then develop a larger project to tackle the long term investment and research and design into better solutions, such as a machine that plays all magnetic media.
- Is there a database of technicians - a resource list?

Discussion Topic Two: Digitization

- We need to know how much media is out there and how much is needed
- Can we develop a turnkey solution for smaller orgs, rather than boutique solutions? Like a machine that digitizes all mag media?
- Rather than choosing a lab or in-house preservation, can we set up onsite stations for communities who care for collections that cannot be shipped for cultural reasons?
- Note: Labs need to train their own people.

Discussion Topic Three: Advocacy

- How are people advocating for their collections?
 - Make it emotional
 - Have a gala
 - Watch the footage - get eyes on the footage. This is more powerful than talking about preservation.

- Getting support from public figures such as leading novelists, historians, celebrities
- Have someone come in from the outside, do a survey. Outside voices can have more impact than internal voices.
- Statistics create an impact.
- Preserve collections that give you small wins and gain attention.

Further Notes

- There is a tendency to say the sky is falling; how do we balance that with the reality that there is still mag media out there and playable? What is the reality of how unplayable the media is and what degradation has occurred?
- Having resources available on the website - report - a gentler way to go (Kelli - this is an interesting point about the strengths of small and large orgs - small orgs may have more authority)
- We need to talk about the successes as well as the challenges
- How do people prioritize their collections? Most use an inventory and condition assessment to determine the most fragile items, and then the curators provide their recommendations
- Question: How big is the problem of re-digitizing?

Join the Conversation

- Take the survey: <https://bavc.org/magnetic-media-study/>
- Ask a question or provide input: write kellishay@gmail.com
- Sign up for the BAVC Media newsletter: <https://ga9rmr10qsn.typeform.com/bavcmedia-email>