

The Magnetic Tape Alert Project

*An initiative of UNESCO to safeguard the documents proper
of cultural and linguistic diversity*

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Magnetic tape recording – for decades the most widely adopted audiovisual recording technology

Developed for audio mid-1930s

Spread worldwide after WW II

Mid-1950s: transistorised battery powered audio recorders

Video recording since 1956

~1980: portable equipment

Digital audio and video formats introduced during 1980s

Originally, magnetic audio and video recording domain of radio, television and professional recording industry

but...

Affordability of equipment and blank tape strongly promoted audio and video recording by academic and cultural institutions → the only adequate means to represent spoken language, music, dance, rituals

Small and scattered, but important collections mushroomed world-wide, forming present day knowledge of the *Linguistic and Cultural Diversity* of humanity









Professional digital production and archiving was taken over by IT technology which lead to fading of dedicated av magnetic tape formats

- Audio since mid-1990s
- Video since mid-2000s

With tape formats for production, also supply of new equipment, spare parts, and service faded

Also fading: empty reels, leader and splicing tapes, reference tapes (for alignment of tape machines)

Prices for second hand machines considerably rising



Replay head of an audio tape recorder: still available, but for how long?

Unanimous agreement amongst audiovisual archives associations:

- Routine transfer of all tape formats will fade within few years
(for some video formats already almost impossible)
- Renaissance of analogue professional tape replay highly unlikely
- Reliable basis of long-term preservation: subsequent content migration in the digital domain (IASA-TC 03)
- Migration to digital repositories to be organised **in time**

Broadcast and national audiovisual archives have already transferred their holdings, or have planned to do so in time

Academic disciplines and audiovisual archiving:

- academic interest (ethnomusicology, spoken language, folklore) triggered audiovisual archiving
- after WW II magnetic tape recording flourished worldwide
- thousands of most important collections are recorded by and kept in research institutes, even private researchers
- today, tens of thousands of publications based on these originals → our knowledge of the linguistic and cultural diversity of human kind
- however: 80% of academic collections are outside archival custody → lacking preservation expertise and budgets – often even without awareness of the threat...

The Magnetic Tape Alert Project

UNESCO and IASA joined forces to raise awareness of this imminent problem

Central project instrument: short online questionnaire in all UN languages, distributed by UNESCO networks and NGOs, hosted by IASA Webmaster

UNESCO profits from experience gained by BL “Save our Sounds”-Project

IASA profits from UNESCO network to spot collections outside the reach of IASA/CCAAA

Expected results - apart from alerting stakeholders and governments:

- coarse overview of the order of magnitude of important collections under threat
- basis for realistic planning to safeguard – at least selectively – the documents proper of linguistic and cultural diversity

Otherwise unprecedented loss of primary sources: We could read about the languages, musics, dances and rituals, but we would be unable to see them, and to listen to them

Thank you

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