

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

Invented in the 19th century

Developed in its modern form for audio in the 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 tape formats introduced during 1980s

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

- affordability of consumer equipment strongly promoted audio and video recording by academic and cultural institutions
- audiovisual documents only adequate means to represent entire spectrum of cultural creations, including spoken language, music, dance, rituals...
- portable equipment permitted documentation worldwide consequently:
 - small and scattered, but important collections mushroomed world-wide, forming present day knowledge of the *Linguistic and Cultural Diversity* of humanity



Carrier based
audiovisual formats
1950s to ~2000



Analogue Walkman – 1980s





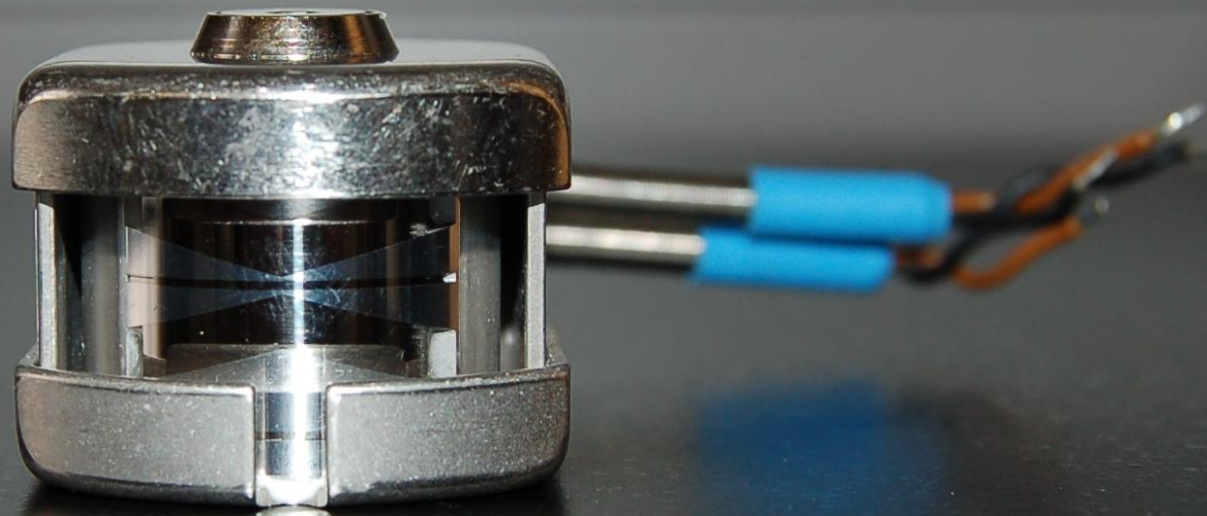
Professional digital production and archiving was taken over by IT technology which lead to fading of dedicated carrier based av magnetic tape formats

- audio since mid-1990s
- video since mid-2000s

As tape formats for production faded, 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 – life expectancy 5000 hours maximum replay time
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 must be organised **in time**

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

Academic collections and audiovisual archiving:

- academic interest (ethnomusicology, spoken language, folklore) triggered audiovisual archiving already before 1900
- after WW II magnetic tape recording flourished worldwide
- thousands of most important collections recorded by and kept in research institutes, also by private researchers
- today, tens of thousands of publications based on these originals → our present 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 no awareness of the threat...

background: academic reputation is based on publications, not primarily on the preservation of generated primary sources

The Magnetic Tape Alert Project

UNESCO and IASA join forces to raise awareness of threat to lose original sources

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

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

IASA profits from UNESCO network to spot collections outside the reach of audiovisual archives associations (CCA AAA)

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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