Managing Audio Visual Collections: Challenges and Lessons Learned

Fateme Rezaei, Special Collections & Archives, RLB Library, University of Baltimore

Introduction

University of Baltimore holds the WMAR-TV news collection which consists approximately 6,000 reels of 16mm films, 400 reels of 2- and 2-inch videotape, and 1,000 hours of videocassettes. The content of this collection illustrates social, cultural, political and economic trends of everyday life and events around Baltimore city and state areas from 1948 to 1993. This also includes materials related to local events that reflect topics related to politics, the civil rights movement, African American history, and community stories.

Playback Equipment - Access

In their current format, most of the material in this collection is only accessible by U-Matic and VHS playback equipment and film projectors. However:

- These tools have become obsolete. There are expensive.
- They need regular maintenance. Specific skills and expertise are needed to work with them.
- Magnetic tapes are obsolete. If stored well, can only last for 15 years without significant degradation. Films can last for many years. However, playing them with a projector and storing them in improper environmental conditions can damage the films and significantly reduce their longevity.

Here at UB:

- We don’t have a projector to play the films which offers a level of protection before digitization.
- Some of the films have a shot list (shot-by-shot description of a film or video) which helps the researchers find out what is inside the footage without viewing the film.
- We have a manual hand crank to view frames from film reels which patrons can use in our public research room when the film doesn’t have a shot list. Most of the tapes have shot lists but not all.
- There are VHS and U-Matic tape playback equipment for patron use. However, to save the tapes for digitization, we encourage our patrons to use the shot list to identify relevant footage and skip viewing the tapes.
- Patrons can request digitized materials to be mailed to an external vendor for digitization after receiving a written permission from WMAR station.

There are 570 digitized films and tapes in this collection which are the results of digitization projects in the past. These films were uploaded to Internet Archive website with metadata for access in streaming only mode. Internet Archive has a Python library, or a command-line interface, that offers programmable access to an archive.org in order to upload, download, and edit in batch process, quick and easy way to make files accessible.

Requests for making copies of or using the footages are directed to WMAR station for permission.

Item-level Processing

- For most AV media collections having an item-level description is appropriate and necessary.
- WMAR is a local news collection. It contains raw news (including the date they were broadcast) and some documentary programs and拧制 films.
- All of 1,400 reels and 2,835 tapes for WMAR-TV news collection have an entry in our archival management software in ArchiveLink.
- New News footages are sorted in chronological order. A new unique identifier was assigned to the videos in 2016.

- Almost, all the video tapes have a shot for which was prepared by WMAR station during the creation of the master video tape. These were then added to the “notes” in ArchiveLink to become searchable and assist researchers in finding relevant footage.
- Only some of the films have shot lists. Digitization seems to be the only way to access those films that don’t have a shot list to make them available to the patrons.
- Digital Objects are added to the Archival Objects in ArchiveLink for footages that have digitized files in Internet Archives.

Environmental Conditions

- In 2016, WMAR-TV news collection was moved from the old library building to a temporary location which eventually became the permanent location of the collection.
- All the WMAR films and videos are currently located in a secure room in the basement of a multipurpose University facility.
- Films are housed in sealed containers (some ventilated plastic and some sealed metal) and placed on library shelves.
- After using A-D strips to detect and measure the permeance of “oxygen syphon”, a sample of the film portion of the collection, a plan was made to change all metal containers to ventilated plastic containers.
- Some film reels are in their original plastic cases, stored on the same shelving.

Reframing and Preserving

The ultimate goal to preserve the WMAR-TV news collection is digital reformating. Fund for digitization costs, digital storage space for storing digitized files are among the challenges for a mass digitization effort. Here are some steps that we took before planning for digitization:

- The library appointed a task force to plan for a digital preservation program.
- The Library assigned a task force to plan for a digital preservation program.
- Digital Preservation taskforce suggested a 5-year plan to implement a digital preservation program. The plan is in the second year and on going.
- Prioritizing magnetic media for digital reformating.
- The University IT department assigned an OCLC Research Storage service with a backup system to the special collections and archives upon the library request.
- Investigating different funding opportunities.
- Planning for storage and preservation.

Special thanks to Aiden Faust, the head of UB Special Collections and Archives for coordinating the revision of the WMAR dead of gift and helping me to improve the access to WMAR-TV news collection.