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LIS 652
1 August 2005

Preservation Re-Recording: Problems and Potential

In “Preservation Re-Recording of Audio Recordings in Archives: Problems, Priorities, Technologies and Recommendations” the author, Christopher Ann Paton, attempts to help the reader assess audio materials within their own collections in order to establish which should be re-recorded onto different media.¹ While Paton provides the reader with a great deal of the background information that is needed to sort out an archive’s re-recording priorities, she leaves the reader with many unanswered questions as to the current audio archival practice which is necessary to understand the acceptability of the process.

Paton uses her knowledge as the archivist of the Popular Music Collection within the Special Collections of Georgia State University (GSU) to impart upon the reader information about many basic problems that occur with audio materials as they age.² Her major points are somewhat intuitive, but are important to remember. For example, materials that are particularly old (near obsolete) or are deteriorating rapidly top Paton’s priority list. Therefore if playback hardware is becoming difficult to find or if the medium’s coatings are flaking or oozing, action should be taken before playback is impossible. Yet, if the context of the recording is not important, re-recording could be pointless. For materials that could be accurately experienced in the form of a transcript, re-recording would naturally be a waste of the archivist’s time and precious money (201).

¹ Christopher Ann Paton. “Re-Recording of Audio Recordings in Archives: Problems, Priorities, Technologies, and Recommendations.” *The American Archivist* 61 (1998): 188-219.

² Biography found on The Society of American Archivists web page under “Author Bios” (http://www.archivists.org/periodicals/aa_v61/abstract-aa61_1.asp#10). Additional information from The Society of Georgia Archivists (<http://www.soga.org/>). (Presentation only)

In contrast, the meatiest section of Paton's article is her discussion of audio format. As her article was written in the early 90's she understandably spends very little time considering digital formats. Her discussion of issues concerning analog formats and their modes of degradation is quite lengthy considering the scope of the article. She provides information such as how to distinguish between acetate and polyester tape bases, for example, and generally provides the reader with straightforward methods for distinguishing a material's composition, which helps the archivist recognize the set of preservation issues that are pertinent. While much of this information is useful to a point, Paton does not completely avoid being tangential. For example, in her discussions of audio formats she goes into a considerable amount of detail when explaining tape speed. Since Paton recommends the actual copying should be done by audio professionals, involved technical considerations, that is ones that exceed past merely categorizing levels of re-recording need in collections, are probably best left to be explained by an audio professional. Miscalculations by the archivist as to the exact volume of materials needing attention could lead to a whole host of misunderstandings between the archivist and the technicians as well as those in charge of the archivist's money.

One place where Paton could have provided the archivist with additional help is in clarifying why the process of re-recording is acceptable in the context of the archivist's code of ethics. In the Society of American Archivists Code of Ethics it is clear that the maintenance of authenticity and integrity of documents is paramount.³ Paton references the Technical Coordinating Committee for the International Organizations for Audio, Film, and Television Archives' standpoint that the "Archivists' function is to preserve history, not to rewrite it" (203). She goes on to mention that the standard is to "transfer, or copy the signal from the original source to the new medium as accurately as possible" (203). While Paton emphasizes that all

³ Information taken from course handout SAA. "Code of Ethics for Archivists" 1992.

steps performed during re-recording should be thoroughly documented, what about archival theory and ethics? Do they temporarily cease to exist for sound archives?

In the book A Manual of Sound Archive Administration the author nonchalantly states, “the sound is more important than the medium” (Ward 109)⁴. The concept that the archivist should maintain the audio, but not necessarily the original form makes sense to a degree. The archivist cannot be expected to defeat decay in every square centimeter of their collection. The problem is that this issue is not brought up at all in Paton’s article. As far as the timeline of these publications, Paton has no excuse. The code of ethics as well as theory of sound recording examples were drafted in 1992 and 1990 respectively, prior to the transfer of materials at Georgia State University (1992-4) and the publishing of this article (1998). In this sense the article is doing a great disservice to its audience by not placing the concept of audio re-recording within the framework of archival theory. From the student’s standpoint, class discussions have only considered copies as a method to provide availability of archival materials (for our class materials has generally meant documents) beyond the physicality of the archive itself. However, as pointed out by the audio archivist, copying of sound materials is a completely valid method of long-term preservation. There is the parallel approach of “preservation photocopying” for documents, yet in this case the archivist is reproducing the material in its entirety: content and to some extent medium.⁵ Even so, for documents, conservation techniques and properly preserving the materials is stressed as *the* solution. In the opening of the article the author recognizes that most trained archivists are not prepared to deal with audio materials (188). This lack of familiarity should prioritize the full explanation of audio archives’ deviant ethical practices. Paton comes only remotely close to the issue in considering how authenticity can (and should) be

⁴ Alan Ward. A Manual of Sound Archive Administration. Brookfield: Gower Publishing Company, 1990.

⁵ From course reserve, A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers

maintained when re-recording audio materials. She clearly outlines parameters in transfer that should be followed to ensure faithful representation of the original, mainly through documentation of the process and employing technological methods that are not better nor worse than what was used in the original recording (204).

However, Paton's lack of framework for her discussion does illuminate a further concern in the article's style. Paton's stated purpose in writing the article is to provide "a context for examining archival audio holdings" within the framework of the experiences of the Georgia State University Archives (188). While it would be difficult to challenge the fact that her information is heavily rooted in the experiences of the GSU Archives, Paton does not follow the experiences of the archives intimately, which could have been helpful to the uninitiated reader by providing a case study detailing real issues that are pertinent when going through this process. She does exploit her background to provide the reader with an excellent background of audio materials and possible preservation issues for each. Yet, it could have been helpful for the reader to present the information in a form that could better illuminate the flow of the re-recording process as a whole.

In fact, Paton leaves the reader with many questions as to how the process flows, because audio's similarities to document preservation issues as well as its differences. For example, are there elements of the media that the sound recording is housed on which have the same intrinsic historical values the sound itself? Paton stresses religious documentation of all actions and methods. But, what considerations are to be taken for the material itself? Conceivably, audio materials contain notes and documentation printed or written on the medium itself. Paton does not give suggestions or outline standard practices for this scenario. Should photographs be kept of the original media with the new copies of the recording or would a typed copy suffice? Or

instead, is it common practice for a more minimal inclusion of the re-recording information alone to be archived? Clearly these concepts bring up issues on how to preserve pertinent background information and possibly the provenance of the material. As an archive takes the time to maintain printed materials that can be nearly as (and possibly more) difficult to preserve, why is this practice not consistent for audio materials? If fragility in documents is not limiting enough to validate the widespread use of photocopying is an accepted substitute, why is it acceptable for audio materials?

One answer that Paton does touch upon, but in a different context, is that of the transience of the medium. While the composition of paper has changed over time, it would be difficult to argue that it has experienced as vast of a change in the twentieth century as audio. Records, tapes, and compact discs are hugely different media and even within their own categories there are wide variations in the materials used in their construction. I would offer one theory that because conservation and preservation practices have not been able to progress as fast as the materials used have evolved that, from the archival standpoint, it may be best to work with materials that are understood best rather than venturing into generally uncharted territory and, as a result, losing the content completely.

While Paton's article "Preservation Re-Recording of Audio Recordings in Archives: Problems, Priorities, Technologies, and Recommendations" provides the reader with an excellent primer on audio materials one may encounter as an archivist, she does not examine the theory behind re-recording thoroughly enough to provide a satisfactory amount of background information for the archivist to use this article solely in appraisal decisions. However, Paton does provide a great deal of technical information that could conceivably be used as an excellent jumping off point for further research in the area.