

Federal Agencies Audio-Visual Working Group

Notes from the Video and Film Subgroups meeting, April 8, 2008

Abstract: Four agencies represented, general discussion of video and the introduction of the topic of profiles and applications specification, explorations of film reformatting with agreement that film-to-film transfer remains important in agency preservation work.

Introduction. This meeting for the video and film subgroups was held at the Library of Congress on April 8, 2008. There were representatives from four agencies other than the Library of Congress: the National Archives and Records Administration, the Defense Visual Information Center, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Government Printing Office.

Video. The discussion of video issues covered workflow at a high level. This in turn led to discussion of the impact and difficulties pertaining to born digital, which is now received by several agencies. One example of a born digital issue is “what is the best method to extract video from write-once (authored) DVDs?” The subgroup showed interest in born-digital workflows, which may be very similar to conventional reformatting. There was also extensive discussion about the preparation and playback of conventional videotapes, with a participants comparing notes about the “tricks” they use for such actions as transferring content from U-matic cassettes.

Are there circumstances in which an agency might not reproduce items at the highest possible quality? Discussion highlighted curators’ natural preference for “perfect” reproduction, but some noted the possibility that certain categories of content, or certain categories of agencies may reformat some items at moderate quality. Some federal agencies do not have permanent custodial-curatorial responsibilities and their requirements are met by reformatting at high-to-moderate quality and in formats that need not last “forever.”

The discussion also highlighted the need for this working group to say something about data management over the long term, e.g., how to think about format migration, even though storage and repository systems are not a central focus for this working group.

The topic of format profiles and application specifications was introduced but no time taken at this meeting to discuss target digital formats (e.g., members of the MXF family, various encoding). This topic will be pursued in future activities.

Film. Discussion highlighted the continuing importance and use of film-to-film reformatting at Smithsonian, NARA, and LC. Several film archives have faced requests from video-documentary-makers for high-definition copies of 16mm original footage. Some of these archives require the requesting person to pay the cost of making a film copy first (for the archive to keep and re-use in the future). The needed video copy is produced from that new safety film. But this seemed cumbersome and some in the group asked, “What would be a better approach for the next year or two, as we sort out a best practice for long term?”

There was an interest in identifying a digital target format suitable for “mastering” but no one in the subgroup felt that the options for this have been well defined. Nevertheless, some transfer-to-digital explorations are under way. For example, LC participates in a multi-archive project for silent, black-and-white content. Meanwhile, NARA has acquired new equipment and systems; not yet installed. They plan to experiment with the film scanning as soon as possible, including 16mm (at 2K) and 35mm (at 4K), some color.

There was talk about the distinction between a *preservation transfer* and *restoration*. For recorded sound, the distinction is clear: roughly speaking a “flat transfer” as compared to “clean up and fix.” One LC film expert reported that line between the two is a little blurry in the case film, especially in the digital transfer realm.