

Linking past and present, audiovisual heritage is 'part of our common history,' UNESCO says on World Day

27 October 2017 – Through sound recordings and moving images, audiovisual heritage provides priceless insight to the past while preserving unique documentation for future generations, the United Nations cultural agency said on the day set aside to raise global awareness about the importance of the fragility of this heritage.

“This [heritage carries memories and testimonies](#), knowledge and ideas, in ways that are vivid and moving and that lay the foundations for better understanding and dialogue between and within generations, as well as between and within societies,” said Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) in her message the [World Day for Audiovisual Heritage](#).

“Linking the past to the present, this heritage is part of our common history, and must be safeguarded and shared as a wellspring of identity and belonging, innovation and creativity,” she added.

Ms. Bokova pointed out that archives of films, recorded sound materials, radio and television programmes are essential for preserving this heritage, “offering us a chance to look to our history and that of others as threads in the great mosaic story of all humanity, on the basis of respect and tolerance.”

Threats to these archives come from many directions, starting with neglect and chemical decay and include technological obsolescence.

“This is why UNESCO is working with Governments across the world to safeguard audiovisual heritage as a source of strength for all to share – to allow women and men today and tomorrow to continue discovering, remembering and sharing the heritage that makes us who we are,” she underscored.

UN digital archiving project

Since its creation in 1946, the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) has played a crucial role in the accessibility and preservation of the Organization’s historic and unique audiovisual archives.

DPI maintains photographs, films, videos and audio recordings of major meetings and events, including the General Assembly, Security Council, press conferences and concerts. It also acts as a repository for UNTV and Radio productions, as well as raw footage covering UN work in field operations globally – in a wide variety of formats, topics and languages.

After more than 70 years, this audiovisual heritage is being threatened by

the natural decay of original analogue media, obsolescence of media formats and playback equipment as well as inadequate temperature and humidity storage, among other factors.

Acute challenges include a lack of funding, disaster preparedness measures and a long-term strategic digitization programme. Additionally, there is a need to mitigate the obsolescence, deterioration and natural decay of existing media formats and increase DPI's capacity to maintain and preserve AV records and archives for the long-term.

Digitization is the only way to preserve these collections, to make them available well into the future.

In 2015, Oman stepped in with a voluntary contribution of \$4.5 million to assist UN efforts in digitizing old video footage and audio archives.

Over the course of five years, DPI's AV Digitization Project aims to digitize selectively 70 per cent of the UN historical collections; facilitate collection access via the Audiovisual Library web platform and preserve the UN audiovisual heritage for future generations; and to apply international standards, procedures and best practices for long-term preservation and sustainable management.

"Preserving the audiovisual heritage of the United Nations is a key task of the Department of Public Information," said Alison Smale, Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, adding, however, that DPI "knew we could not do it alone, and Oman has been an incredible partner."

"With their contribution, we have now started a major digitization project. Today we are sharing with Oman the first copies of recordings that are now available in a digital format on this special day. The public also will now have access to the UN's historical films and meetings, which is a major benefit of this effort," Ms. Smale underscored.