Unlocking
Our Sound
Heritage

BRITISH LIBRARY

Disaster prevention and recovery of audio collections

#SaveOurSounds

HERITAGE FUND

Disaster prevention and recovery of audio collections

However carefully we look after our collections, we can never fully remove the risk of serious misfortune. This brief document outlines some steps that can be taken to minimise that risk, and some actions you can take now, to minimise the impact of such a disaster should it occur.

A subject as important and complex as this cannot be comprehensively covered in a brief leaflet. This document aims to get you thinking about and planning the first steps in preventing and preparing for potentially catastrophic events in your archive. At the end is a useful list of more detailed reading on the subject. If any members of your team have previous experience with salvage incidents, making time now to share insights as well as read, discuss and develop a plan in advance is strongly encouraged.

Minimising the risk

Key to minimising risk to collections is establishing good general storage conditions. These include stable temperature and humidity, avoidance of direct sunlight and dust or other airborne contaminants. These conditions apply to pretty much any archival collection, but see the Unlocking Our Sound Heritage leaflet **Storage for Sound Collections** for more specific information.

Similarly, many of the risks facing sound collections could apply to any archival collection:

- Flooding: leakage from roofs or overhead pipes, water levels if stored near or below ground level
- Fire, resulting in heat, flame or smoke damage
- Other natural disaster, such as earthquake or lightning
- Theft

Magnetic tapes however are additionally vulnerable to damage from electromagnetic interference. This may be caused by proximity to motors or lightning conduction, so it is vital that any magnetic media be stored safely away from magnetic interference.

Where second copies exist of audio items, they should be stored in a geographically separate location. Any items stored as audio files must also be backed up to a remote location. These steps will minimise the risk of content being lost, even if individual physical items are rendered unusable.

Understanding other risks to your collection through risks assessments, and doing what you can to mitigate those risks, will reduce the likelihood of incidents.

Disaster preparedness

Disasters generally strike without warning and require immediate action to reduce damage. To be fully effective, such action needs to be planned for and well understood in advance, by those required to undertake it. It's crucial therefore that you have a detailed plan in place, that the people required to carry out the plan can be available at short notice, and that access to resources such as cleaning or drying materials should be simple and straightforward.

An appropriate response will vary according to the nature of the disaster, and to the specific audio formats affected. Each type of disaster requires its own plan, but all should cover:

- Identifying who should be contacted in the first instance, and who should be placed in charge
- Assessment and control of the primary problem
- Health and safety
- Assessment of salvage needs and preparation planning
- Identification and location of necessary clean-up resources
- Salvage operation procedures

Audio materials are frequently made from composite materials, and an understanding of these in advance will be crucial in selecting the most appropriate salvage procedures. Vinyl or shellac discs for example, outside of their sleeves, can usually be decontaminated using demineralised water, while instantaneous discs with a gelatine coating will immediately begin to decompose if exposed to water. Formats housed in cassettes or other shells can usually be cleaned in demineralised water, but will need thorough and careful drying to avoid development of mould. Freezing at minus 18C is often recommended for paper-based materials, but will not be appropriate for tape-based items.

The time window in which to clean or remediate carriers may be limited, and it may be impossible to give the same level of care and attention to each item, so an ability to prioritise will be important. This will be a great deal simpler if each of the items in the collection has already been individually numbered, and identified at collection or item level, in an accessible catalogue or inventory. This will assist salvage personnel identify higher priority collections or items, even without personal knowledge of the collections. An electronic inventory may not be accessible at the time it is most needed, so maintaining a useable physical copy as part of a salvage package may be worthwhile.

Further information

The British Library, Salvaging Library and Archive Collections, Emma Dadson
https://bit.ly/35X00K7
This detailed guide covers salvage of general library and archive collections affected by the two most likely disasters, namely water or fire damage.

CCAAA, Disaster Recovery Documents and Resources for Audiovisual Materials, Lydia Creech
https://bit.ly/2KveWaC
A great bibliography of online resources on disaster preparedness and recovery, primarily covering audio and audiovisual-specific materials.

Canadian Conservation Institute, Disaster recovery of modern information carriers: compact discs, magnetic tapes, and magnetic disks, Joe Iraci
https://bit.ly/3sGYeq4
Detailed advice on the cleaning of audio, audiovisual and data carriers.

US National Archives, Audio Guidance: preparing, Responding and Recovering from an Emergency
https://bit.ly/39TkrZk
Includes format-specific guides to the salvage of audio material.

National Film & Sound Archive of Australia, Caring for Audio
https://bit.ly/3p75hGo
Contains a good introduction on audio format tolerance to extreme conditions.

AVPreserve, Recovering the Collection, Establishing the Archive, Kara Van Malssen
https://bit.ly/3qFFEwW
A valuable case study of a real-life flooding disaster, following Superstorm Sandy in 2012.