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Introduction to Moving Image Archiving

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Better than Nothing Preservation:
Conserving the Media Legacy of Equality Now

Introduction

Like many non-profit organizations, Equality Now barely exists. With an annual

budget of 3 million – more than half paying the salaries of staff and consultants in four

different countries – the organization cuts corners in every conceivable way to survive.

Their staying power is in part due to the urgency of their cause: eradicating Female Genital

Mutilation (FGM), Sex Trafficking, Sexual Violence/Rape, and overturning laws in the US

and abroad that discriminate women. The daily grind in the office involves momentous

efforts to obstruct cultural practice or laws that harm, demean, or discriminate against

women and girls: a never-ending marathon of amassing signature, staging protests, raising

funds, spreading the word through various media outlets, and utilizing legal measures to

stall the abuse.

And, so, Equality Now (EN) does not have much wiggle room to think about their

media legacy (the preservation of history caught-on-tape). As the organization's database

manager, and one who has worked primarily with non-profit organizations (NPOs) since

2006, I have seen the devolution of many VHS collections like the one in the EN conference

room. They collect dust. They overturn and are shoved into any available shelve pocket.

Their regard by staff deteriorates. Labels fade and become brittle; metadata is lost forever

(if not already illegible). Tapes are haphazardly returned to the shelves (or not returned at all), unraveling any attempts to catalogue them by a staff-member, now long gone. The thought of utilizing time, money and resources on a preservation projection can overwhelm the steeliest department manager. "I know we have this stuff has to be organized," one such manager told me, standing before a closet barely containing an avalanche of DVDs, "but we have to save the world first."

The focus of this project is too develop a "better than nothing" preservation plan that conserves the material and repurposes it as relevant in present-day advocacy efforts. Keeping the project as non-intrusive and inexpensive as possible is key to winning the approval of the busy staff. With a budget of only $1,000, the plan involves drawing from the resources Equality Now already has available – interns, software, a non-profit status - to assess, digitize, properly store, catalogue, and prepare for online accessibility. The budget itself assumes labor is "pro bono," or connected to an existing staff member's duties, and otherwise largely comprised of minor purchases and petty cash.

Step I: Assessment

The conference room consists of three bookcases dedicated to a video library, and contains an estimate of 300 tapes, mostly VHS (but some ¾" and Beta-SP). The collection consists of B-roll material - such as recordings of conferences, events, speeches, and protests staged between 1992 and about 2003 - and widely distributed works commissioned by Equality Now (documentaries, public service announcements, etc.). A lesser, but still prominent type of material in the collection are media clips of Equality Now in the news – or "stories" as they a referred to by the staff. Executive Director Taine Biene-Aime interviewed on Oprah, or Equality Now mentioned in a Nightline segment on

Trafficking. An entire bookcase mass-marketed material related to the work of Equality Now. A handful of recordings made in or for Nairobi and London are marked PAL, and France, SEACAM. Indeed, the entertainment center in the office is equipped with a multi-system VHS playback machine that can handle all broadcasting standards.

This is information is from eyeballing the labels. If I really want to preserve the collection properly, I had to familiarize myself with the content. With a glass of wine and some string cheese, I sat down to watch several randomly selected titles such as "International Lawyers Meeting on Sex Trafficking," "Using the Law to Promote Sex Equality," and "Women Can't Wait," a recent speaking engagement at the UN[1]. The flip-side of those urgent, tense diatribes, are titles such as "Equality Now 10th Anniversary" and "Glamour Magazine Celebrates Equality Now" celebrity-filled fundraising events hosted by Meryl Streep or Sarah Jones and include performances by Alanis Morrisette and other artists, many who have survived FGM. I also enjoyed seeing Mandy, our Membership Manager, fifteen years younger, speaking to an interviewer covering an anti-trafficking demonstration with a rabble-rousing attitude I had never seen from her.

The tapes had suffered a near-uniform quality loss. The scan lines so pronounced to that when a woman in a business suit stands before a velvet curtain, the two fabrics appear to be same texture. Color loss is evident in the lack of nuance between shades. In "International Lawyers Meeting on Sex Trafficking," speaker Cheng Jie's black hair is indistinguishable from her black suit. Many tapes are recorded in Long Play (LP) speed, a feature that compresses the image data to maximize playback time...but also maximizes

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[1] Equality Now still occasionally makes VHS copies available if they plan to distribute them in more remote regions of African and the Middle East where a VHS player may be the only playback machine available.

deterioration. Even more unfortunate, the original camera recordings events and speeches combine poor lighting and white balance with cheap equipment. It is difficult to tell if the tapes have deteriorated or the original production value is just that poor quality.

The content, however, is still watchable. It is still audible. It provides a wealth of data on controversial world affairs that is of great interest to researchers, biographers, and legal teams seeking precedence. True, once digitized, the generation loss is captured forever. A shame, but image quality is of little importance to users accessing the material. One does not request a copy of "EN Summer Seminar 1" for its lush cinematography. Maintaining the integrity of the audio and enough resolution so that faces and locations are recognizable is goal one of "Better than Nothing" video preservation.

Step II: Storage

 "Why can't we just digitize everything and throw all this stuff out," asked Lakshmi, the Communications Director, during our interview. "It's just sitting here, and it's mostly crap" she says, gesturing flippantly toward the sad collection.

It is a good question and one I found difficult to answer. If the tapes already show palpable demagnetization, if our servers are backed-up nightly and our data tapes stored off-site, if the goal of preservation is to make everything accessible online where it is further downloaded, uploaded, reloaded, re-contextualized, etc, what exactly IS the point of keeping the damaged source material on the shelves where it will continue to rot?

My response to her was to find a best practice that is a middle ground between throwing everything out and keeping everything forever. After all, "throwing out" is not the same thing as "magically turning into the air we breathe". Tapes end up at best on a thrift store self and at worst in the landfill where the non-biodegradable material does about as

much damage as a plastic bag. In 2006, the Dual-Life Tape Company issued a report on

environmental concerns regarding magnetic tape and had this to say about "throwing out"

the material:

> The best landfills are not completely tight throughout their lifetimes and a certain amount of chemical and metal leaching will occur. There is also a risk that tape media might end up in an illegal landfill or be incinerated, releasing toxic material into the atmosphere. Low cost bidders for media disposal, for example, may be working through brokers to send media to developing countries or to illegal waste dumps in the U.S. to reduce disposal costs, so be careful![2]

Additionally, and in spite of precautions taken to prevent data loss, original source material

is its own backup plan, one that costs nothing in either money or labor. And Equality Now

isn't hurting for shelf space. Take it away and what you have left is an empty wall devoid of

a media legacy that is visible and appreciated by visitors and staff.

The plan now includes a streamlining of the current collection. Three points of

criteria determine the fate of a tape: the quality of the image on the tape, its uniqueness (Is

it a duplicate? Is accessible through organization or website?), and its usefulness to the

organization either as a research tool or as an artifact.

Under the "Better than Nothing" preservation plan, tapes chosen to stay on the

Equality Now shelves are housed in plastic, opaque containers[3]. These containers are

sought as in-kind gift from a distribution or post-production house looking to repurpose

their wares. The remaining tapes will be sent to GreenDisk[4], a "technotash" recycling

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[2] Dual Life Tape Company, The. "Best Practices for Responsible Disposal of Tape Media: The Environmental and Economic Benefits of Recycling vs. Destruction." 2006. Dual-life.Com. 5 December 2010 <http://dual-life.com/dual-life/Media_Disposal_guidelines_Dual_Life_Tape_final_1_.pdf>.

[3] Besser, H. (2005, 9 6). Physical Properties of Film and Video. Retrieved 12 7, 2010, from http://www.nyu.edu/tisch/preservation/program/05fall/physical-properties.pdf

[4] GreenDisk. http://www.greendisk.com/. 2005. 5 12 2010 <http://www.greendisk.com/gdsite/faq.aspx>.

company that erases the magnetic material , breaks it down to its smallest component, and redistributes it to other organizes interested in the components.

I measured the temperature and humidity of the room using a twenty-dollar hygrometer from Radio Shack. The temperature fluctuates between 73 and 75 in the dead of winter, about 7 degrees higher than the 68 degrees recommended by Howard Besser[5]. I was surprised to find that the bookcases, about a foot deep, are 2 or 3 degrees warmer in the back than the room itself. Humidity resides at the recommended 20% RH in all parts of the room, even near the water cooler. I anticipate a much more streamlined collection after digitizing the media, and recommend that all tapes be moved to the shelves furthest from the window, radiator, and water cooler. I checked with the building management and learned that the climate is the same during the evenings and weekends, so while stored in less-than-ideal conditioners, there is some consolation to know that the indoor temperature fluctuates only seasonally rather than daily.

Part III: Digital Conversion

Outsourcing the digital conversion of these tapes is not an option on a $1,000 budget. After researching video capture cards – an octopus-style connector hub sometimes described as an S-Video-to-USB adapter - I settled on the highly rated Elgato device for its image capture quality and its proficiency with Apple computers (the platform where the media will be stored). At $80 a pop, I purchased two.

There is only one Apple computer in the office, a Power Mac G5 purchased in 2006 as part of an initiative to move toward more media-orientated advocacy. It functions as both a client and its own server and, according to the IT consultant for Equality Now, is the

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[5] "(Besser)

best place to store the converted files. The Mac server is the current resident for the digital

files created in recent years (and saved on DVD, another media collection lacking a system

of preservation, but not the focus of this project).

By far the most laborious and painstaking part of the process, the digitization phase

anticipates a need for extra help. Equality Now interns are generally students of law, social

entrepreneurship, international affairs, and policy. For this project, a student of a collection

management program will be sought to project manage and convert the video from analog

to H.264/MPEG-4 (and contained in a .MOV wrapper per Apple requirements), the

standard for digital video compression. A part-time intern of the usual type will assist the

process, spot-checking each file after the conversion, taking notes on the material, and

logging metadata into the EN Media Database (discussed in the next section).

Devising best practice naming conventions for the digital files is critical; and for an

organization of this size, intuitive. Equality Now has focused on eradicating four types of

abuses: FGM, Trafficking, Sexual Violence/Rape, and Discrimination in Law. These four

subjects are used in every aspect of administration from the distribution of funds in

accounting, to the cataloguing of paper files and the pages of the website. So ingrained are

they in the Equality Now vernacular it makes sense to use them in the top of the subject-

heading tree. Each file name begins with an acronym that identifies the subject matter,

followed by another acronym that identifies the type of content (Event, Public Service

Announcement, and Conferences), the year and the primary key that maps the file to the

database. Figures 1, 2, provide a reference guide to naming protocols, and Figure 3 shows

how a sampling of file names might look like.

Fig. 1 File Name Acronyms: Subjects

Female Genital Mutilation	Trafficking	Sexual Violence	Discrimination in Law	Equality Now General	Other Topics
FGM	TFK	SEX	LAW	EQN	OTH

Fig. 2 File Name Acronyms: Content Type

Event	Public Service Announcement	Conference	Equality Now in the Media	Documentary	Misc.
EV	PS	CF	ME	DC	MS

Fig. 3 Example of what a sampling of the files would look like:

VHS Title	File Name
"Using the Law to Promote Sex Equality"	LAW-CF-2001-093
"Glamour Supports Equality Now"	EQN-EV-2004-177
"Equality Now PSA 2010"	EQN-PS-2010-516
"Trafficking Protests on UPN 9"	TFK-ME-1999-045
"Meryl's Birthday"	OTH-MS-2007-990

I debated whether to allow a brief description in the file name that would further identify the content; but I want the staff to use the database. The EN Media Database - further discussed in the section on metadata - is a searchable application and in its renewed form will connect to the file via path name. By creating naming conventions that are spare but have some meaning to the staff users are discouraged from going directly to the media folder on the server, which could result in accidentally deleted, renamed, or moved files, but still able to locate files if the pathname in the database is corrupted.

Part IV: Metadata

Imagine my surprise when, while interviewing Lakshmi, I – the database manager - learned for the first time that there is, in fact, a database for the EN VHS archive. I was both disappointed and relieved. While the plans I had made for creating a database based on

Dublin-Core[6] metadata standard in Access were scrapped, it was great to hear that categories, keywords and dates were already established. In 2002, a go-getting office assistant organized the library and managed the creation of database with the IT manager, who is still with EN and directed me to its location on our server.

The EN Media Database: simple yet searchable, with controlled vocabulary for categories and subjects and an ability to search by keyword. However, some misconceptions about video terminology are evident in the controlled vocabulary. For example, "video" is used to describe every type of magnetic tape format, without clarifying if it is a ¾", Beta-SP, etc. Another problem is the broad term "Category" labels the field of media formats. The chart in Figure 4 illustrates the marriages and conflicts between Dublin Core standards and the fields in the EN Media Database. Reconfiguring the metadata fields in to fit Dublin Core will enhance our ability to map the material to resources on the web, where it will remain properly sourced and credited, and more importantly, found.

Dublin-Core[7]	EN Media Database
Contributor	*No Equivalent*
Coverage	*No Equivalent*
Creator	*No Equivalent*
Date	Date
Description	Description
Format	Category
Identifier	Footage Type

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[6] Dublin Core Metadata Element Set. (2010, 11 10). Retrieved 12 07, 2010, from Dublin Core Metadata Initiative: http://dublincore.org/documents/dces/

Language	*No Equivalent*
Publisher	*No Equivalent*
Relation	*No Equivalent*
Rights	*No Equivalent*
Source	Broadcast By
Subject	Subject
Title	Title
Type	Category (Media Formats)

Lakshmi and I looked at the subject list and discussed the kind of metadata she would like to have at her fingertips. We noticed that list, while in adequate, is a mixed bag of general subjects and specific topics. A good example is the subject name "Adelaide Abankwah Case."

Adelaide Abankwah is the pseudonym of a young woman from Ghana who sought political asylum in the US, claiming she was fleeing FGM. This claim was later suspect, but garnered much press and support from human rights activists in the late 1990's. In the world of metadata, the subject, in the context of Equality Now advocacy, looks something like this:

- Title: Adelaide Abankwah Action Alert

- Type: VHS

- Year: 1997

- Category: Female Genital Mutilation

- Subject: FGM Case Studies

- Keywords: Adelaide Abankwah; Ghana

For the Better than Nothing perseveration plan, the existing subject list is broken out into three nested areas: Category-Subject-Keyword. Interestingly enough, if catalogued in the archives of the the Immigration and Naturalization Service (who deported Abankwah), the piece might be shelved under "Fraud."

Other points of database renewal include: creating a pathname field that is linked to the media file; renaming fields so they are in keeping with current terminology; and writing Visual Basic script that automates file names after the record is entered. For example, if a user enters new metadata for a recording of a conference on trafficking, they would enter the Trafficking as a category, Conference as a type. Once the record is saved, the database generates a file name based on the information it was given and assumes its location.

The most important thing is for staff to use the database to its maximum potential. Certain fields in the new database – such as keyword, creator, and subject – will now be required (entries in more recent years are increasingly scant before they disappear completely). Finally, Equality Now should identify the staff member responsible for the metadata and update the new duty is in his or her job description.

Part V: Access

My interview with Lakshmi and conversations with other staff members, yielded a common question "Who is interested in this stuff?"

Much of material is painful for a regular viewer to wade through. Even if interests are peaked by the site of Meryl Streep or Alanis Morrisette, attention easily drifts under a cloud of demagnetized image and audio. However, there some true gems to be found, such as a fiery speech from controversial legal theorist Catherine McKinnon, famous for her

inflammatory diatribes against the porn industry. Navi Pillay, currently the High Commissioner of Human Rights in the United Nations, is also prominent in the material, an important archive for her inevitable biographer.

During the assessment phase, I approached the content through the eyes of a researcher and I noticed an interesting shift in the Equality Now agenda, and by extension the feminist movement. Speeches made the last 90's focus on the rights of women, but increasingly the language includes "girls." Today, "women and girls" has officially replaced the word "women" when discussing the agenda of Equality Now. How and why this shift came about (is the protection of girls in third world countries the "final frontier" of gender equality?), is just one area of social development a researcher may explore.

Accessibility is also an untapped advocacy tool, rather blasphemously underused as over 40% of our members are students. As the data analyst, I see the trends of the Google Analytics are clear: when our members find us, they find us while researching feminism, law, FGM, Trafficking, etc. An accessible library opens up a new world of grant opportunities, and upgrades our role in the movement as something other than just an organization that sends out emails.

The final phase of the Better than Nothing preservation plan to select some material for online access, and make all of the material accessible by lending program. As primary goal of this project is to preserve and digitize, the access phase is preparatory. Distributing the material is a larger issue, its fate left to the managers of communications and development.

During the digitization process, qualifying material is tagged for three areas of access: DVD compilations for library lending, upload to popular viewing forums (Youtube,

Website, Blogs), and online archives (Internet Archives, Internet Law Library, etc.) Copyright language is instituted and applied to the EN Media database, after which the catalogue can be put on WorldCat and other open research networks.

Problems, Solutions, Final Thoughts

The Better than Preservation plan is just that: better than nothing. Climate cannot be change, uncompressed files cannot be stored, a paid staff cannot be hired to log and convert on multiple machines. The plan is also not without budgeting concerns; particularly those surrounded the space, software and equipment needed to store the media. For instance, the database was scripted using Access, a Microsoft Application, but the media files will be stored on an Apple computer. The budget calls for the installation of existing Windows software on the Mac computer, using an application called Parallel to assist the process. Space is also an issue, as Equality Now is currently battling digital storage problems. An extra, 500GB hard drive is another purchase included in the budget.

The media legacy of Equality Now is sustainable. It is recyclable. It reusable. It is an old poodle skirt waiting for local production of Grease. As in the case of Adelaide Abankwah it provides EN with an opportunity to assert its perspective into the historical record via metadata (FGM or Fraud?). It is also alive with a history that can be utilized in the present day fundraising and advocacy efforts, but only if accessing the material does not intrude on efforts to end global abuse against women and girls. With a steady digression to a fixed point, focusing on the plan in steps during a period between campaigns and events, Equality Now, and any non-profit institution can join the movement towards global information access.

Bibliography

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Appendix 1: Budget Sheet

"Better than Nothing" Preservation Plan
Start Up Budget for Equality Now

Storage	
Labels/Stickers	100.00
Containers*	250.00
Cleaning Supplies	50.00
Printer Ink	110.00
Shipping (GreenDisk)	50.00
Digitization	
Elgato Conversion Card (2)	190.00
SEAGATE 500GB internal hard drive for power mac	
	70.00
Parallel Software	80.00
	900.00
Petty Cash	100.00
Total Start Up Costs	**1,000.00**

* Seek In-Kind donations