

SAFEGUARDING STRATEGIES OF SOUND ARCHIVES AND ITS MEANING TO THE PACIFIC REGION

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Abstract

Sound archives and connected visual archives are all the time challenged by a speedy deselection of items that follow daily demands of decision making according to cultural policies and economic necessities. These challenges are imposed upon specific archival materials of a value yet incomprehensible to our recent level of knowledge. Since we are not able to fully understand all dimensions of collected materials which is often accumulated to serve single publications or written qualifications, their contents are in many ways inaccessible, not only physically or digitally.

My paper in this regard is based on experiences with small scale archives in Asia situated in universities and research institutions, which do store rich collections on analogue carriers or as digital files yet do often not follow up with maintenance and quality control in terms of accessibility. A paradigm shift towards a better understanding of the maintenance and quality matter is seemingly the only way out in order to keep those items of which importance for future uses is not guaranteed. The consequence of these thoughts can lead to strategic suggestions that can be applied to many cases, especially in a region with permanent environmental and social tournaments such as the Pacific Region.

Keywords

Sound archiving, Pacific region, Digital knowledge, Regional features, Strategies

BASIC QUESTIONS

Safeguarding is an interesting concept that has to be scrutinized in its details before being brought into the context of this paper. If someone is going to safeguard something, then this act implies that there is something of a specific value and of a weak nature at the same time. The questions arising are the following:

- What makes something having a specific value, to whom, and in which time/space relationship?
- Why is it weak and has to be safeguarded, by whom, and in which time/space relationship?

Instruction material on audiovisual archiving (Edmondson 2016 [1990]) gives good examples, why audiovisual archivists should be neutral in making decisions on the selection and deselection of items they want to care for. This principle is still valid and right, yet it should be modified. Learning from history, from the thousands of libraries, archives, treasure magazines, storage officers, there was always and will always be a selection and deselection policy. Everything done in an archive is adhering to a policy, whether it is wanted or unwanted to the individuals who are involved. Human beings change their views on values as often as they change their living purposes, their approaches to daily tasks, their own “strategies” in overcoming difficulties. Thus, safeguarding strategies of anything valuable will change along with these changes.

The Pacific Region is insofar quite special since those strategies for succeeding in survival through steady renewal, quick responses to challenges, appropriating any kind of model, and restless search for better solutions, were faster changing than elsewhere. Also, these changes impacted the life of many formerly isolated communities in a global context that seemed overwhelming at the beginning, and burdening at current times. Safeguarding of sound archives is just a small yet very sensitive part of it.

With all the social and cultural changes experienced, we may have to rethink the following:

1. How does a safeguarding strategy can be made fit the environmental development at current times and in the nearer future?
2. What are the specific challenges regarding the modification of selection and deselection policies in this context?
3. What might be the outcomes of our current behaviour?
4. Can we afford to still wait for better technology, being understaffed, not acknowledged, insignificant in comparison with other production modes?

BASIC ANSWERS

Let me answer these questions step by step as well as I can.

1. In order to keep the efforts in safeguarding increasingly under control, we may have to change our approach to collecting. Meaning, we may not be able to collect everything regardless of contents. This will request a new scrutiny carried out by those people who decide about selective criteria: We have to better choose what to keep and what not. It may be of little help to store lessons, for example, that will never be looked at again since most of the students already did not look at the original presentation. Another solution could be to make recordings on demand only and to shift responsibilities of processing and metadata delivery to the users. This would – at least – allow for a better overview on demands and shortcomings in the field of diverse actions such as teaching, exhibiting, illustrating in a wider context of public media, or research. Items that are less asked for, would be automatically less often recorded, stored, processed. If we compare with other environmental issues, we can easily observe that creating less waste comes to a better understanding of waste and necessary substance. This could also be applied to sound items.

For example: field recordings in a traditional understanding of hard-core ethnomusicologists are those rare recordings done in remote areas of creative people in their usual surroundings who would never choose to travel far away in order to deliver their skills. Many of them may not be aware of their rare skills or the value they can create.

Nowadays, I feel it to a certain extent imposing and patronizing if some ethnomusicologists demand recordings of sound and skills, buying clothes produced and crafts practiced in remote areas in order to safeguard a living style of people whose vision is to change their living style in response to a modernity that is brought to them, last but not least, along the same path visitors, among them these ethnomusicologists, are coming and going.

I suggest creating a better co-operative atmosphere and a space of freedom of choices in order to create multiple possibilities to represent the past and to keep the knowledge

about any creative skills, among them sound production. The way, people might be represented will also have to change, so do archives, recordings, and metadata. The most effective way to respond to current changes that took place throughout history, to let the most active agents decide about necessities. The choice should be always with the creative people that are partners on the same level. Following this, there will be not created too many things that will not be used at a later time.

2. Avoiding recording trash, waste, or unused items (whatever term we may choose) is a core idea in this regard. I think that we may empower a lot of people to collect their own valuable sounds and then to manage a better way of safeguarding these recordings. This has to include an empowering of freedom of choice. The guidance and the new policy may have to accept diverse perspectives and multiple purposes. Learning from the past, archivists or curators may not be anymore in the position to choose what they like – or to say it more precisely – are under pressure to learn and explore this way of freedom of choice as part of their lifelong updating. While authenticity and the so-called real thing were a long time at the heart of sound collectors, the understanding may have to shift to viewpoints that are beyond this narrow screening. It happens often that skills recorded are sorted according to their capability of being exhibited on a stage, in a program, at an event or the like. These marketable features may have to be shifted and set beside a meaningful dealing with sound creativity. It is no longer an abuse of traditions to recreate them or to fragment them, yet researchers may need an option to retain access to historical shapes. So, there will be many different options dealing with this kind of recordings and all will have to follow a policy of selection and deselection that is built up through algorithms of use and impact. Policies will change far more often than in the past and options to be kept will be delivered by using space and time of previously over-collected areas such as redundant recordings of media events or repeatedly given lectures.
3. The outcome of our current behaviour might be that we will sit for a long time on a huge amount of sound recordings, that we willingly create low quality sound recordings in order to serve visual requests, that we still hesitate to learn to co-operate and to understand that giving these recordings to professional institutions with the capacity to transform them into useful items in the digital world means getting them back and that we do not feel the organised loss of every day waiting for things to happen. Yes. I think that waiting for better times, other decisions, brightest leaders, staff, resources, money, projects, is the dead of many sound recordings that would not fall under the category “trash”. So, my personal view is that we should not wait, we should act. Now. Here. Everywhere.
4. I am sure, that technology will surprise us all with new ideas. Yet, I also know from experience that a surprising technology comes from surprising visions and a high demand for problem solving. It is not just a playground of audio engineers who find some tricks and magic spells. Technology must be challenged and people have to demand better solutions. For this, archivists have to steadily learn and adapt to fast changing requests. I am also sure that the focus on marketability will fade sooner or later. The focus may shift into supporting specific human skills, communicating of complex structures and thinking that cannot be expressed by other means. The potential of sound as a tool for orientation, movement patterns, local habits, an adaptation of moods and emotions to changes in daily life might be not yet fully explored. While writing this, I know that there are surely many other colleagues writing similar things like me, thinking in a similar way or doing even more in order to find these capabilities. If we see how much knowledge could be saved through historical sound recordings, we

can only roughly guess how much potential we do not know yet and is inherently saved by what we create today.

Now, setting these observations into a context of the Pacific Region means to understand its specific geography of sound, people who create the sound, people who safeguard, and who will use these safeguarded sounds in the future.

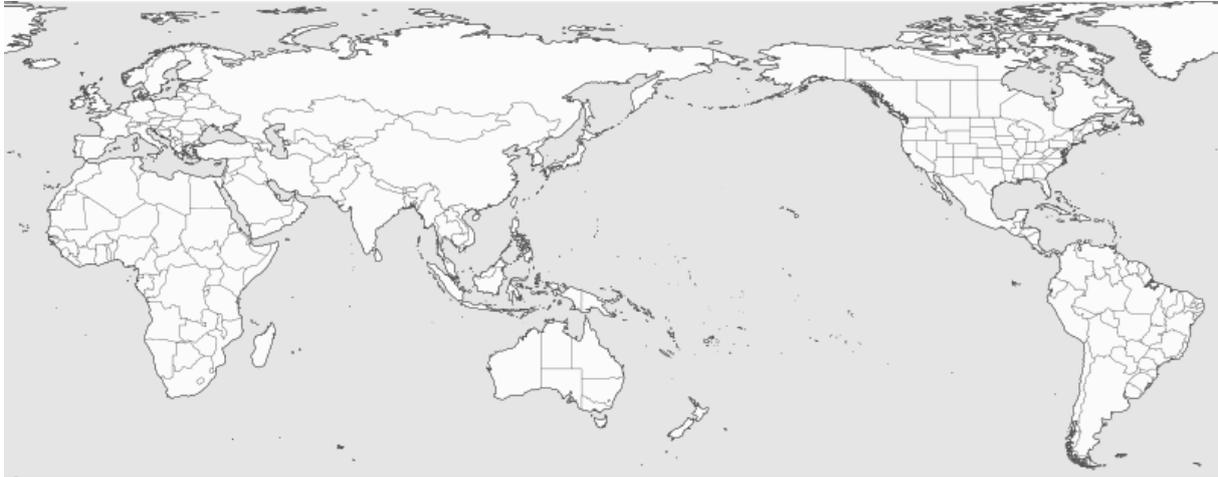


FIGURE 1: Map scheme centred on the territory of the Pacific Region (Public domain by WMC).

The Pacific Region is often considered an empty area. So was Europe during the high time of the Roman Empire. And America before the arrival of strangers. We know that these were wrong pictures and we should be well aware of how wrong this picture of an empty Pacific region might be.

Studying the Pacific Region, one may be taught the following

“The study of the Pacific Islands helps us to see the impact that isolation, scarcity of resources and land, small populations, limited economic opportunities, and social/ political dysfunction, and colonialism can have on a region.”¹

CONCLUSION

The Pacific region consists of still very isolated communities (30 000 islands), naturally surrounded by water and far from each other. Yet the Pacific Region could be also seen as an expert area of networking and task sharing since these are skills of utmost importance in such a region. Though many places are isolated, the inhabitants are mixed and carry cultural features of a number of groups of people settling in or moving through the area. This is not seen as a weakness, but a strength. Looking through this gaze, the Pacific Region is in many ways an excellent model in order to capture future demands, the will of keeping peace, independence, yet well working co-operation, developing yet trusting in traditional patterns of life as well. Colonial times left traces that are irreparable and caused a destroyed balance of power structures, natural resources, and social development issues. However, it is a fact of history that cannot be made undone, so, all we can do, is taking better care of the future and working towards recreating a meaningful society and continuing development of better equipped people who can make use of their freedom of choice in all matters. What will rapidly change in the future?

¹ This is teaching material made available by Sara Cederstrand on 23 May, 2001, http://maps.unomaha.edu/Peterson/geog1000/Notes/Notes_Exam3/Pacific.html, last accessed on 21 October, 2019. Used material Clawson (2001), DeBlij & Muller (2000), Haub & Cornelius (2000).

There will be no higher demand in population density. The number of people living in an area is provenly no guarantee of success. There will be less work that demands biological fitness of the human body, which calls for balancing activities of which the performing arts might be an important part. There will be widely access to any type of knowledge, so that monopolizing knowledge will not lead to more power. This may impact the way of how this availability is used and managed. Professionals will have to focus on more than one specialization, students may have to study more than one time or a wider spectrum of skills. These features may also apply to many other societies around the globe. In the Pacific Region they might be more clearly visible first. The huge ocean, a resource yet to be explored in all its depths, sound included, is possibly a place of the future not only for people already living in the area. We do not know yet, how this will look like, but we may understand the vision. Dreaming of the Southern Sea is not a dream anymore.

Safeguarding strategies in the Pacific Region are, therefore, a very hot topic. It is so significant for the human survival that we are not even able to understand the topic's importance to the full extent. For this and many other reasons I am curious about everything that brings us closer to an understanding of future visions and to the insight that we have to act without further delay.

Finally, I want you to hear what Ray Edmondson (2014) had to say about it. He says that being an audiovisual archivist is not simply a job but it is a calling. It only comes with sacrifices and it has only been successful when these sacrifices are not the centre of attention. Ray Edmondson from Canberra was one of the driving teachers in my life. He encouraged me in many ways to deal with archives, with staff, with students, with regional preferences. He, as well as Dietrich Schüller, were not only great mentors, they are still friends I can count on. And I think that we all have some recordings, events, or key persons in life, we count on.

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