Survey on knowledge transfer within audiovisual archives

Between April and May 2020, we distributed an online survey for the wider audiovisual archiving community. The intention of this survey was to get a global idea of the concerns and methods of knowledge sharing within audiovisual archives. The questions attempted to identify the existing knowledge sharing methods, concerns and challenges of knowledge transfer, and techniques of how to improve knowledge sharing within audiovisual archives. The final stage of this research project will be in 2022. In this stage, the survey's data will be combined with qualitative research conducted in the field to write a conclusive report on the expert knowledge that needs to be transferred, the challenges related to passing on this knowledge, and the methods that archivists can use to share knowledge within their organizations.

This document presents our initial insights into the methods and challenges of knowledge sharing, the different types of knowledge that need to be shared and five main themes that emerged from the survey results.

Survey participation

The survey was distributed through the websites and mailing lists of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (CCAAA), International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA), and several other online channels. A total of 135 people completed the survey. Participants represent countries from across the globe, but the majority of them are from Europe and Northern America. This majority work for government, public organizations, and not-for-profit organizations. They represent a varied group of people, covering different positions and responsibilities within audiovisual archiving. Approximately one-third work directly with the physical collection objects and have titles that include audiovisual archivist, lab technician, digital archivist, or restorationist. Almost half of the respondents have senior positions that often include supervising responsibilities and have titles that include head of film preservation, film collection manager, film preservationist, or curator. About one-tenth of the respondents are directors of institutions. This relatively high number of directors might be due to the fact that they were likely reached by channels of the above-mentioned umbrella organizations.

Types of knowledge identified through the survey

Participants of the survey were asked to identify which types of knowledge they are afraid to lose within their organization and who possesses this knowledge (see image 1). The majority of respondents chose technical knowledge about the material and equipment. Knowledge of objects in their collection and development of the collection was the next runner up, which includes knowledge about acquisitions, past practices, standards, preservation and restoration activities. Other types of knowledge mentioned in the survey is knowledge related to collection management,

restoration practices, digital archiving, and computer programming. Considering that more than half of the respondents are staff members with supervising responsibilities, it is surprising to see that there was not more concern for losing knowledge related to collection management knowledge.

Respondents indicated that the knowledge they are most afraid of losing is possessed by archivists, colleagues working directly with the collections, laboratory technicians, and retired colleagues. However, it became clear from the answers that knowledge about the collections is not solely with the people who permanently work(ed) with the collection material, but can also be with film programmers, external curators, writers, film scholars, researchers, filmmakers, and people who work with collections on a project basis. Their involvement with the collections is different from those of employed archivists, since some hold valuable knowledge about the practices of filmmaking and lab work at the time the works within the collection were created. Others possess knowledge about the copyright and exhibition history of a collection such as the network of programmers, distributors, copyright owners, and artists involved with the work.

Preliminary results

A preliminary analysis of the survey results reveals five emerging topics that relate to the practice of knowledge sharing and challenges encountered by audiovisual archivists: **(1) documentation, (2) communication and collaboration, (3) training and education, (4) staff members who leave, and (5) prioritization of knowledge transfer.**

Sharing knowledge through documentation

One of the most commonly used methods of knowledge acquisition and sharing is through documentation of information, standards, and workflows related to a collection. 'Reading documentation on standards and workflows' is by far the most popular answer to the questions about how they learn at their workplace. In another question, half of the participants answers they

make sure their colleagues can find their ways to important documentation. In organizations where knowledge is said to be shared easily, 50% gives 'efficient and effective practice of documentation of knowledge' as the reason. One participant even points out that "documentation is the heart of sharing".

How do you yourself learn at your workplace?

Documentation can mean many things and needs to be broken down into its forms and uses to understand the different methods in place. Multiple participants mentioned the documentation of shared workflows, processes, and procedures. Other frequently practised methods of capturing knowledge are reports on meetings, project evaluations, and reporting back after attending external workshops or conferences. Collection information is most commonly shared through databases and finding aids. Communication through e-mail can be a way of documentation, yet not accessible to everybody. An interesting method is described by one of the respondents, who explains the use of an automatic tool through which essential information can be automatically extracted from email conversations by making use of artificial intelligence software. Other methods of sharing documentation are through internal platforms, such as a wiki, a blog, or a shared file system. For sharing technical knowledge, written tutorials, guidelines, and explanations are used.

Although many of the respondents recognize the importance of documentation and practice effective methods of documentation, half of the participants indicate that there is room for improvement. For example, by means of a better, more unified internal documentation system. Problems come up when it is difficult to (make time to) implement a regular practice of documentation and for this documentation to be actually used. It becomes clear that documentation methods need a few basic conditions for it to be effective: information needs to be available and accessible, organized in a comprehensive structure, and there needs to be an active practice of documenting, updating, and using the documented information.

As we have seen, many respondents worry about losing technical knowledge related to audiovisual collections. This challenge is reinforced by the fact that much of this knowledge is not necessarily

within an organization, but could be with specialized contractors such as technicians repairing specific audiovisual equipment. Besides the use of written documents for capturing technical knowledge, multiple people suggest creating audiovisual recordings on the use, maintenance and repair of equipment they work with.

Communication and collaboration

Many participants indicate that knowledge is usually shared through daily verbal and written communication about work activities. Often, this is a natural result of collaborating with colleagues on projects or discussing specific case studies, as one colleague explains their method: "Close collaboration with colleagues on complex projects, giving advice, critical reflection, suggestions, based on a broader understanding of the issues at play." In addition, information related to work is often exchanged through communication during dedicated meetings, such as this example of an office brunch, where they "invite people to come have lunch and watch and listen to a presentation of one of the teams".

In collaborating on projects, the advantage of working in small teams is stressed multiple times. Further favourable conditions for these more intuitive practices of knowledge sharing relate to the culture on the work floor, characterized by a cooperative attitude in which there is room for discussion and asking questions, where colleagues are generous in sharing information and a degree of self-initiative in sharing and asking is present. "Sniffing around and asking lots of questions", as one participant describes their method of learning at their workplace.

Concerns regarding a lack of a sharing attitude are expressed several times, or as put by one of the respondents: "lack of good will when it comes to working on common good". Some participants notice communication problems between colleagues from different generations due to a reluctance to share information, or the other way around, a reluctance to ask questions. These difficulties are experienced in both directions. One respondent mentions that a younger generation is not always aware of their lack of knowledge about analogue techniques. At the other hand, another respondent notices difficulty in transferring digital skills and knowledge to colleagues less familiar with digital technology.

Training and education

Education and training are the most obvious conscious ways in which knowledge is transferred, both within organizations and in collaboration with other institutions or external educational programmes. Training within an archive, both in formal or informal ways, happens through shadowing colleagues, hands-on workshops, and cross-department workshops - particularly when new staff has been hired. Furthermore, a vast majority sees workshops with colleagues to share expert knowledge as a beneficial method for improving knowledge transfer within their organization.

Besides internal education and training, exchange between organizations is considered important. One participant remarks that cross-institutional exchange of practices can be beneficial on two levels, "for developing new perspectives and knowing how to better share knowledge" and "enlarging perspective in order to understand better our own knowledge." We were interested in knowing how many colleagues are stimulated to attend external educational programmes and conferences, and how bringing in external knowledge contributes to the knowledge inventory of their organization. 80% of the participants say they are stimulated to attend conferences and

workshops. Some organizations emphasize they make an effort in securing colleagues who have been attending a training or conference, report back to their colleagues afterwards, so that knowledge gained elsewhere flows back into the organization. Yet, many wish for improvement: 20% of the respondents are not stimulated by their organization to attend conferences and workshops. Furthermore, a majority of the colleagues would like to see increasing participation and international collaboration. Motivations for attending international training are to acquire information connected to new findings and developments in the field, but also to build a network of colleagues from other archives that could serve as an additional source of knowledge. In line with these results, a network of experts to call upon is one of the most desired tools for sharing knowledge.

Some notice they have been struggling with issues related to workflow and collection management, such as unclear distribution of work and tasks among colleagues, a lack of tailored strategies and planning, and an absence of institutional vision and policy, all of those issues negatively influencing knowledge sharing. Several organizations address this issue by inviting external specialists to either conduct an analysis of the organization, to participate in designing a collection management strategy, or to hold workshops on workflow management.

When colleagues are leaving

One of the biggest challenges that emerges from this survey is related to securing and passing on knowledge when employees are leaving or have already left. There are many reasons for changes in personnel, retirement being one of the main concerns. A relatively small percentage answers that 'time and resources are invested into knowledge transfer of soon-to-retire colleagues.' At the same time, nearly half of the respondents indicate that the knowledge they are afraid to lose is exactly with those retired colleagues. This discrepancy is reflected in the other responses, expressing concerns about colleagues retiring without transferring their specialized knowledge.

Some of the institutions make an effort of maintaining the connection with retired employees, for example through retired colleagues being available for questions or they keep being involved as volunteers or on a freelance basis to train and teach younger colleagues. Another method employed is doing oral history interviews with (soon-to) retired colleagues to capture particular topics and the knowledge they hold. Multiple respondents expressed the desire to have retired employees involved, either as mentors or through workshops in which they can share their expert knowledge with their colleagues.

For several reasons, the knowledge from retired or soon-to-retired colleagues is not always transferred systematically. This might be due to the fact that their knowledge is not acknowledged and valued by their colleagues or managers. Some point out there is a reluctance to pass on knowledge and other challenges are of a more definite nature: "How to stay in touch with retired colleagues when they are not allowed to be on the premises anymore?". Some of the respondents expresses concerns about not having a designated successor: "knowledge transfer is difficult if you have no one to pass the knowledge to." Sometimes it is hard to pass on knowledge which has been built up through years of experience and is highly specialized and/or is often dispersed among different areas of work.

Another issue that came to the fore is job insecurity. A lack of permanent staff and job security poses risks to sustaining the knowledge within an organization. As one respondent remarks, the

uncertainty of the current situation due to Covid-19 intensifies this concern. Challenges mentioned range from not having *any* permanent audiovisual preservation staff on board to mainly working with contractors and volunteers: "they come, they learn, and then they have to leave".

Prioritizing knowledge sharing

The answers uncover that one of the main challenges of knowledge transfer has to do with not being aware of the importance of knowledge sharing within the organization, both at the management level and amongst staff members. A lack of acknowledgement often goes hand in hand with a lack of understanding and validation of the collection and the knowledge connected to it. Sometimes it has to do with a lack of understanding amongst colleagues, about each other's work activities and knowledge. Knowledge transfer is not always an organization's priority and as a consequence, no resources are allocated to facilitate it.

As a logical answer to this problem, participants suggest time and resources should be dedicated to knowledge sharing and it should be integrated into regular work activities. One of the suggested ideas is to make it a requirement for every staff member to become familiar with the workflows and tasks of their colleagues. Another respondent suggests to schedule exclusive sessions for sharing knowledge, during which staff members explain and discuss their work on a collection object or a particular project. To make such activities more effective, the knowledge shared through these sessions should also be documented for future reference.

First conclusions

A first analysis of the survey's results already gives an insight into the global concerns and ideas related to knowledge transfer within our institutions. The results unveil particular practices and methods for knowledge sharing that have already been applied on either the institution's or individual's initiative, for example through specific practices of documentation, education and training, and knowledge sharing activities. The respondents also offer suggestions for desired methods to improve knowledge sharing. It became clear that two important prerequisites are necessary for methods to be successful: the validation of knowledge and skills and consciously enabling knowledge sharing within an organization, by both management and staff. The survey participants have noticed various obstacles in knowledge transfer. Some of these obstacles are directly related to the organizational setting, for example when there is little or no room or resources for implementing knowledge transfer methods, even if individuals are willing to do so. On other hand, there might be a need and interest for knowledge sharing on the management level, yet a lack of suitable conditions or strategies for motivating staff members to share what they know.

These first conclusions pose some key questions for further research, such as: **How to convince management to prioritize knowledge transfer? What can be done by individuals to enhance knowledge sharing – even when resources are not available? Which methods are applicable for which particular types of knowledge? How can one sustain and develop knowledge within an organization with an unsteady workforce? How can institutions put knowledge transfer on the agenda?** These questions will be explored in the next steps of this research project, through follow-up interviews with survey participants and through in-depth interviews and observations within several archives around the globe.