Save Our Sounds: Audio Preservation and the British Library

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Sound archives. Media preservation. Audio recordings. Collective memory.

OUTLINE

Audiovisual heritage plays a significant and growing role in framing our memory of the past hundred years, and the British Library holds the national sound collection, consisting of over 1.5 million discs, tapes and audio files, containing over seven million recordings. These cover the broadest possible spectrum, from historical, dramatic and wildlife material to all genres of music. Today, they face the twin threats of degradation and the obsolescence of access technology.

Elsewhere, throughout the UK, there are hundreds of thousands of audio recordings held in public and private collections which further add to the richness of our collective memory. Archival consensus internationally holds that we have approximately 15 years in which to digitise all our audio and video material; by around 2030, the scarcity of legacy replay equipment and spare parts will render the process prohibitively expensive or impossible.

The *Save Our Sounds* campaign launched by the British Library is intended to address these problems across the UK. A UK Sound Directory

has been compiled, listing significant audio collections held throughout the UK, both large and small, public and private, in order to demonstrate and celebrate the wealth and diversity of audio material that exists, and could be lost if action is not taken.

Plans have been drawn up to create a National Preservation Network, consisting of ten regional digitisation centres within local archival institutions. These will be equipped, trained and funded for a fixed period to preserve materials held within their localities. It is hoped that in further raising awareness of the importance and vulnerability of audio heritage these local preservation hubs will become financially self-sustaining.

Save Our Sounds is also the name of an eight year programme within the British Library, intended to preserve the majority of existing British Library collections within that time, to improve the methods by which we acquire and preserve born-digital material, and to create a comprehensive National Radio Archive for the UK.