



Smithsonian Institution Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative Strategic Plan FY2021 – FY2025

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Our Vision

From December 2015 to May 2019, eleven Smithsonian units participated in a pan-institutional audiovisual survey and preservation readiness assessment. The primary goal of both projects was to gather comprehensive data about one of the Smithsonian's most at-risk collection subsets. These projects produced a comprehensive inventory of audiovisual collections held at the participating units, along with corresponding condition and storage environment information. The inventory identified approximately 295,000 audiovisual assets – 152,000 audio recordings, 71,000 motion picture film objects, and 72,000 video recordings. As of 2019, only 13% of these collections have been transferred to preservation-quality digital files.

The Smithsonian Institution's audiovisual collections have been recognized internationally for their cultural value, with several collections becoming part of the National Film Registry and UNESCO's Memory of the World Registry. The content of these collections spans a vast range of topics, such as oral histories, global scientific studies, experimental films, rare home movies, documentary and narrative films, rare species studies, primary documentation of anthropological and ethnographic research, artist interviews, historical footage, and music recordings from around the world. Most of these collections are unique – existing as an original recording on a single carrier. Furthermore, many of these collections are degrading or are on obsolete formats with no sustainable plan to preserve them. Many have already degraded to the point where the content has been lost.

With four years of research and recommendations from subject matter experts, the Smithsonian Institution is well-positioned to move forward in planning pan-institutional strategies to address the challenge of preserving our audiovisual collections. The National Collections Program (NCP) and the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives (SLA) are dedicated to providing resources and guidance in overseeing a proposed Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative (AVMPI), which would help to significantly move forward pan-institutional efforts to preserve and increase access to these collections.

Based on similar initiatives taking place around the world, the Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative (AVMPI) will implement a pan-institutional approach to audiovisual preservation. This approach will maximize existing resources, create greater leadership capacity within SI, increase work efficiency, and streamline our current workflows and processes to achieve our goals. Within the first four years of AVMPI, our goals will be focused on facility development, collection prioritization, workflow development, increased digital infrastructure, digitization, and effective communication and access solutions.

Our Purpose

To support the preservation needs of Smithsonian audiovisual collections through an innovative, pan-institutional approach.

Our Goals

Facility Development

One of the primary recommendations from the 2019 Audiovisual Preservation Readiness Assessment (AVPRA) was the need for a centralized space dedicated to the conservation and preservation transfer of our audio, video, and film collections. The assessment found that most of the preservation equipment held at the Institution is under-used, with most of it being in storage or staffed at 10-20% capacity. Additionally, as of 2018, there was only one full-time staff member at the Institution whose role was solely dedicated to the in-house digitization of audiovisual collections.

Our current rate of preservation across the eleven participating Smithsonian units stands at approximately 4,500 assets annually. Based on this rate, the Smithsonian is facing an estimated total loss of 190,000 audiovisual assets by 2034.¹ In order to stem the tide of irreparable loss for audiovisual assets, we are focusing on these goals for physical space design and development:

- Secure space for, design, outfit, and manage the creation of a centralized digitization laboratory space for the preservation of audiovisual collections that would maximize Smithsonian resources.
- Strengthen existing SI laboratories through equipment acquisition, software development, and increased staffing for rare format specialization.
- Establish an AVMPI Team that consists of one (1) program coordinator, four (4) digitization and cataloging specialists, one (1) rights and reproductions specialist, and one (1) curator who would support the preservation of pan-institutional audiovisual collections through cataloging, digitization, and program planning.
- Develop physical workflows for the movement of collections between units, AVMPI, and external vendors to ensure the retention of intellectual information and the overall physical safety of collections.

Collection Prioritization

The AVMPI will focus its initial efforts on the digital transfer and preservation of audio and video collections. Many audio and video formats are recorded on magnetic media carriers, which are at an elevated risk of deterioration and require a swift response to preserve the recordings. Film, if there is no advanced deterioration, is safeguarded by climate-controlled storage, which is not true for magnetic media. Additionally, four out of five of the Smithsonian's top formats, in terms of quantity, are audio and video formats – compact audio cassettes, ¼-inch audio tape, VHS, and grooved audio discs. By focusing initial efforts on these specific formats, AVMPI will use resources most efficiently and make a significant impact on the state of audiovisual collections.

Based on unit responses from the 2019 Audiovisual Preservation Readiness Assessment (AVPRA), it is estimated that 75% of audiovisual collections are unique and require immediate preservation transfer. Given this sizable number, successful preservation efforts will require several degrees of prioritization. Thankfully, as part of AVPRA, the highest priority collections, based on format degradation and content value, have already been identified². However, due to

¹ This date is based on a fifteen-year timeframe, as identified by the [Library of Congress' National Audiovisual Preservation Plan](#) (2012), for the preservation of magnetic media before these collections will no longer be viable for playback and/or transfer.

² See *Section 2.2.1 High Priority Collections*, https://siarchives.si.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/AVPRA_Final%20Report_v20190717.pdf

the lack of item-level cataloging in many units, it remains difficult to identify all collections in need of immediate preservation. As part of this Initiative, increased cataloging efforts will be supported in order to develop a more comprehensive five-year prioritization plan that will:

- Utilize data from the 2019 Audiovisual Preservation Readiness Assessment (AVPRA) to focus preservation efforts on the highest priority collections across SI units.
- Collaborate with unit curators and content specialists to determine SI-wide needs for preservation and subsequent access
- Partner with existing and new institutional initiatives to support efforts to highlight Smithsonian collections that tell a unique and diverse viewpoint.

Workflow Development

One of the largest challenges in developing a pan-institutional audiovisual preservation effort is the multitude of workflows that exist, along with the varying levels of staff expertise, within each SI unit. These workflows are used for such tasks as physical tracking and preparation, metadata generation, digitization transfer, quality control and assurance, transcription, DAMS ingest, digital storage and management, integration with collections systems, and public access. It will be imperative to develop new workflows that consider both unit-specific requirements and pan-institutional needs. These workflows will streamline the digitization process, and, in turn, reduce overall costs for the Institution. Our main tasks that would support this goal include:

- Establish a minimal set of administrative and descriptive metadata to support an efficient digitization workflow. Support descriptive cataloging by making all digitized files available to unit staff via the Smithsonian's Digital Asset Management System (DAMS).
- Develop and/or utilize software systems to support the capture of descriptive and technical metadata, digitization transfer, facilitate quality assurance and control, and track physical collection movement.
- Use both a 1:1 digitization workflow and parallel transfer stations, as appropriate, to support Initiative goals.
- Develop protocols and standards for AVMPI staff and for working with external vendors for the physical conservation and digitization of rare formats.

Digital Infrastructure

With the anticipated increase in production volume, consideration must be given to institutional preparedness for digital preservation and storage. AVMPI will work closely with OCIO to determine network connectivity requirements, maintain existing file standards, convey storage needs, and ensure long-term digital preservation. Maintaining close communication with OCIO will ensure that the digital infrastructure is in place to support the continued digitization and ingest of audio, video, and film media files to the projected scale of AVMPI.

Communication and Access

While the Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative's primary goal is for the preservation of audiovisual collections, disseminating and sharing the compelling stories found through preservation will enhance our understanding of the complex issues facing our nation and the world.

- Work with existing Smithsonian initiatives, such as the Open Access Initiative, the Smithsonian Transcription Center, the American Women’s History Initiative, and the Latino and Asian Pacific American Initiative, to support collection engagement and access.
- Consult with individual units, along with source communities, artists, and community-based scholars, in defining protocols for addressing collection-related inquiries and concerns. This can include the generation of cultural documentation, culturally appropriate collections care and handling, and the potential source community interest in digital return and repatriation.
- Engage senior-level leadership to convey the needs of the Initiative and identify resources for completing five-year goals.

Human Capital

Direct Oversight

The Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative will be overseen by the National Collections Program (NCP) and the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives (SLA). Direct supervision of the AVMPI Team will be performed by the Archives’ Preservation Coordinator. NCP will provide funding for the AVMPI Team staffing positions, while SLA will support the Team on a day-to-day basis – providing direct feedback, offering direction, and reporting progress to upper management.

Unit Stakeholders

Smithsonian units who choose to partner with AVMPI will be responsible for providing support, as outlined in a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), for activities relating to the overall preservation of their collections. The unit may be required to provide: object handling oversight; labor and equipment support for the transportation of all collection items; and overall collection management support, in terms of providing relevant collections metadata, conducting curatorial research, and overseeing the long term physical and digital management of assets created through AVMPI.

Task Force

The AVMPI Task Force will be responsible for the development, direction, decisions, and research tasks to support the AVMPI Team. Each unit that manages and preserves audiovisual collections through the Initiative should have, at minimum, one representative on the Task Force. Members will ensure supervisors and directors are aware of and provide support for AVMPI goals. Each member is asked for a two-year commitment, with possibility for extension.

For FY2021–FY2023, the AVMPI Task Force is comprised of the following SI staff:

- Alison Reppert Gerber, Preservation Coordinator, Smithsonian Libraries and Archives (Chair)
- Blake McDowell, Media Archivist, National Museum of African American History & Culture
- Daisy Njoku, Media Archivist, National Anthropological Archives | Human Studies Film Archives
- Michael Pahn, Archives Specialist, National Museum of the American Indian Archives
- Crystal Sanchez, Video and Digital Preservation Specialist, Office of the Chief Information Officer | DAMS

- Jennifer Snyder, Archivist, Archives of American Art
- Kira Sobers, Media Digitization Manager, Smithsonian Libraries and Archives
- Dave Walker, Audiovisual Archivist, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
- Jessica Warner, Senior Digitization Program Officer, Office of Chief Information Officer | DPO

Advisory Committee

The AVMPI Advisory Committee will be responsible for providing senior leadership for the AVMPI Team and Task Force. They will convene on a quarterly basis, or as needed. The primary responsibilities of the Committee are: to act as a link between the Initiative and the larger Smithsonian community to increase visibility; to provide guidance for specific issues or challenges; to support and represent the interests of the Initiative within the Smithsonian and the larger cultural heritage community; and to convey needs and advocate for resources to support the long-term goals of the Initiative.

- Joshua Bell, Acting Director, National Museum of Natural History | National Anthropological Archives
- Sherri Berger, Digital Program Officer, National Museum of American History
- Karri Brady, Director of Leadership Gifts, Office of Advancement
- Deron Burba, Chief Information Officer, Office of the Chief Information Officer
- Richard Kurin, Interim Director, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
- Chuenfung (CF) Lin, Program Manager, Smithsonian Facilities | Office of Planning, Design, and Construction
- Emily Niekrasz, Web and Social Media Coordinator, Smithsonian Libraries and Archives
- Tammy Peters, Interim Chief Archivist, Smithsonian Libraries and Archives
- Rebecca Snyder, Digital Media Specialist, National Museum of Natural History
- Bill Tompkins, Director, National Collections Program
- Eliza White, Director of Advancement, Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

Initiative Team

In response to the findings and recommendations of the Audiovisual Preservation Readiness Assessment (AVPRA) published in July 2019, the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives (SLA) requires **seven (7) full-time, term positions** (NTE 4 years) to support the ongoing efforts to bolster audiovisual preservation efforts at the Institution. This team would work pan-institutionally to address both unit-level and institutional preservation planning needs.

The AVMPI Team will be structured with one (1) program coordinator, four (4) digitization and cataloging specialists, one (1) rights and reproductions specialist, and one (1) curator. This structure alleviates the burden from the SLA team supervisor by creating a built-in reporting structure to the project coordinator.

Initiative Coordinator

The Initiative coordinator will serve as the team lead for the AVMPI Team. They will be responsible for working directly with unit stakeholders to identify collection needs, develop and oversee specific preservation projects, and directly supervise the AVMPI Team members. Additionally, the coordinator will collect and assemble critical information about collections to assist in the assessment of the Smithsonian's overall audiovisual collections stewardship. They will compile reports and recommendations relating to preservation for the use of committees, focus groups, and other units within the Smithsonian.

Audio Engineer

The audio engineer will perform all duties related to the digital reformatting of audio collections. They will inspect and evaluate analog audio formats and perform minor conservation activities as needed; generate and/or update technical metadata to AVMPI standards; perform the digital tape-to-file transfer of audio assets; transcode, edit, and produce digital audio derivatives; and conduct preliminary quality control tasks.

Media Collection Specialist, two positions

The media collection specialists will focus on preparing physical materials for digitization and conducting condition assessments prior to delivery to engineers. They will be responsible for performing final quality control and generating descriptive metadata about content for digitized assets. A strong understanding of audiovisual media and digitization practices is required.

Two collection processing specialists have been recommended based on the time required to generate descriptive content metadata and assess each media asset. These tasks will require multiple positions to eliminate potential bottlenecks in the preservation workflow.

Video Engineer

The video engineer will perform all duties related to the digital reformatting of video collections. They will inspect and evaluate analog video formats and perform minor conservation activities as needed; generate and/or update technical metadata to AVMPI standards; perform the tape-to-file transfer of video assets; transcode, edit, and produce digital video derivatives; and conduct preliminary quality control tasks.

Rights and Reproductions Specialist

The rights and reproductions specialist will serve as the rights, permissions, and licensing expert for audiovisual collections digitized by AVMPI. Working closely with unit staff, the specialist will conduct research to determine rights, ownership of copyright, and required clearances. They will secure rights for use in exhibitions, website, and online educational portals, as well as provide due diligence in cases of potential orphan works and unknown copyright assertion.

Curator of Recorded Media

The curator will be responsible for researching, analyzing, and reviewing Smithsonian audiovisual collections to highlight previously hidden collections. They will use AVMPI tools and existing SI resources to create digital information resources, as well as assist with the curation of collections for online publication and exhibition. The curator will partner with existing SI initiatives, such as the American Women's History Initiative and the Race, Community, and Our Shared Future Initiative, to provide audiovisual collection resources to bolster our understanding of complex issues affecting the nation.

Partnerships

American Women's History Initiative

In 2018, the Smithsonian launched the American Women's History Initiative, one of the country's most ambitious undertakings to research, collect, document, display, and share the compelling story of women. With a digital-first mission and focus, the Initiative uses technology to amplify a diversity of women's voices—not in one gallery or museum, but throughout the Smithsonian's many museums, research centers, cultural heritage affiliates, and wherever people are online—reaching millions of people in Washington, D.C., across the nation, and around the world.

The Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative will provide access to Smithsonian collections in new and exciting ways that can support the dissemination of women's voices in history. The AVMPI rights and reproductions specialist and curator will be tasked to work closely with units and initiatives to support their goals through collection discovery and access.

Race, Community, and Our Shared Future Initiative

In 2020, the Smithsonian announced the launch of its Race, Community, and Our Shared Future Initiative, which will explore how Americans currently understand, experience and confront race, its impact on communities and how that impact is shaping the nation's future. This Initiative will encompass resources from across the Smithsonian's museum, education, and research complex to examine the historical context of the challenges facing the nation today. Leaders, collections, and programming from the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Museum of the American Indian, the Smithsonian Latino Center, the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, the National Museum of American History, and the American Women's History Initiative will be engaged in this unprecedented project.

As with the American Women's History Initiative, the Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative is uniquely positioned to provide support for the Race, Community, and Our Shared Future Initiative through the preservation, discovery, and sharing of visual and aural collections that amplify stories from diverse viewpoints. AVMPI is a pan-institutional endeavor that will have access to collections from across the Smithsonian and can create digital content for these and future SI initiatives.

SI Transcription Center

In 2019, the Smithsonian Transcription Center launched the TC Sound platform to support the transcription of and access to digitized audio recordings found within Smithsonian collections. Transcriptions of these recordings increase accessibility, unlock hidden content, and support the long-term preservation of these assets. Creating transcriptions for audiovisual collections can be time-consuming and costly, but they are required for meeting current accessibility standards. TC Sound provides an engaging and easy-to-use platform that provides critical information about our collections, while raising awareness and increasing advocacy for their unique preservation needs. The Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative will work closely with the Smithsonian Transcription Center to provide digitized collection content for transcription.

Office of Advancement

The Smithsonian Office of Advancement will partner with AVMPI to raise funds for projects integral to the success of the Initiative, most notably the planning, development, and construction of a state-of-the-art facility dedicated to audiovisual preservation.

Alignment with Smithsonian Strategic Plan

Be One Smithsonian

We will initiate new lines of communication across the Smithsonian.

As a pan-institutional Initiative, AVMPI will be tasked with fostering and maintaining strong communication with units whose collections will be preserved using AVMPI resources. Not only will AVMPI staff communicate with audiovisual archivists and collection stewards, they will also reach out to curators, advancement officers, social media managers, and others who can advocate for our audiovisual collections outside their preservation needs.

We will foster greater collaboration and coordination between the central administration and other parts of the Institution.

By structuring AVMPI with a Task Force and Advisory Committee, it ensures that the central administration stays apprised of AVMPI goals, accomplishments, and needs. This collaboration will not only streamline workflows but also maximize the use of resources at the Smithsonian.

Address Complex Challenges

We will magnify our national and global reach through new collaborative approaches.

Cultural institutions around the world have undertaken large-scale audiovisual preservation initiatives in the past decade, uncovering collections that aid in our understanding of the human experience. The Smithsonian's collections of audiovisual media can greatly contribute to this narrative through collaboration with content creators, source communities, and leaders in the field.

Preserve Natural and Cultural Heritage While Optimizing Our Assets

We will ensure that the Smithsonian's undergirding physical infrastructure is capable of supporting its continuing mission, collections stewardship responsibilities, and a new strategy articulated in the Strategic Plan.

The Smithsonian has already invested heavily in audiovisual materials by acquiring, cataloging, and storing tens of thousands of them. This investment will have been for naught if the content of the recordings is lost due to the inherent vulnerabilities of the media. One of AVMPI's primary goal is to make certain that these collection assets remain viable and available to researchers long into the future. To ensure Smithsonian physical and digital infrastructure can support the preservation goals outlined in its Strategic Plan, AVMPI will work closely with OCIO, Smithsonian Facilities, and other stakeholders to make certain resources are used efficiently and that any infrastructure changes can support preservation well into the future.

We will optimize the shared use of Smithsonian facilities.

Shared facility development is a central goal for AVMPI. This space would fully support new staff members by providing state-of-the-art digitization suites for audio and video media, a fully equipped conservation space, environmentally controlled temporary collections storage, and an imaging suite for collection documentation. Unit staff may also have access to the space to perform preservation activities and take advantage of the shared resources.

Understand and Impact 21st Century Audiences

We will tell the complete American story, in person and online, in all of our museums, exhibits, and programs—and across them—with a focus on all Americans nationally and locally.

Through preservation, we can provide increased access to audiovisual collections that enhance our understanding and appreciation of the complete American story. Sound and moving image collections have a unique and impactful way of reaching audiences, and AVMPI will support this through existing and new access portals that highlight our digitized collections.