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Assessment and Prioritization Session Introduction

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Hello, my name is Chris Lacinak and I have had the pleasure of working with the following six presenters in coordinating this session on what remains a very significant topic. Today I have the honor of introducing this topic and am going to try to offer some context and perspective to the group of presentations being given.

I will start by reminding us all of the definition for the word "myth". A shortened definition of the word myth from dictionary.com is:

> *A traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some event, with or without a determinable basis of fact that explains some practice, rite, or phenomenon of nature.*

I use the definition to point out that for a long time now we, as a field have been relying on myths to manage our audiovisual collections. Saying something is a myth doesn't say that it is wrong. It says that there isn't valid scientific data behind it, and gone are the days that this field should be built upon speculation and anecdotes. In the spirit of JTS and as a need of the valid and professional field that we have evolved into, it is time that we transition from myth to fact. It is time to demystify audiovisual collection management and build upon valid scientific data.

With this in mind and our topic at hand let's talk about the problem in need of a scientifically valid solution here. The problem is one that we as a community are all too familiar with. We confront it over and over again. *How to effectively manage the assessment and prioritization of audiovisual objects?* On an individual collection or archive scale this is a problem. On a global scale this is an emergency. There are a massive number of audiovisual objects in need of being managed and our primary tool when dealing with such numbers is prioritization. The need is all too clear to every one of us.

On any scale, assessment and prioritization demands a strategic approach that takes into account condition and value of the object of preservation and obsolescence of the system that surrounds it. With obsolescence being widely understood by the community this session will focus primarily on condition and value.

I just used two ambiguous terms.

1. Object of preservation
2. Value

It's important that we truly understand these terms in order to successfully fulfill the task of assessment and prioritization.

First, object of preservation. You might wonder - *Don't we understand this term by now? Assessment and prioritization are not new activities to the library and archive community. They are practices that date back many years to preservation and collection management of paper documents and still image collections.*

Therein lies the issue to a major extent. The problem remains because we have yet to come up with new tools and methodologies that address the systemic nature of audiovisual materials. The community carried on using methods that we knew and were comfortable with. We have used traditional models based on paper and still images, or what I'll call static objects. For many years we failed to see the need to align our methods and tools with the nature of audiovisual, or what I'll call dynamic objects. Past assessment and prioritization projects and activities have borrowed from traditional static practices by focusing only on

the most basic visual inspection of the media to make a judgment on the condition of the object of preservation. In doing this we run into a couple of fundamental problems.

First, we fail to recognize the systemic aspects of the components required to asses the actual object of preservation. *How do we define that ambiguous term?* The object of preservation is the audiovisual signal. A visual inspection of the media alone only looks at a very small portion of the total system required to produce the object of preservation. It wrongly assesses the dynamic object under a static "lens".

Second, only the most major issues are evident with a basic visual inspection. For instance, we know without a doubt that media deformation will result in poor tape to head contact resulting in signal degradation. This apparent of an issue only applies to a minute percentage of media. Most issues don't reveal themselves until the media is in transport. Once it is in transport we know that issues such as high amounts of friction result in signal degradation. What we don't have is solid data on chemical indicators, thresholds and extents that can be captured in the physical domain and are scientifically proven to correlate with transport issues resulting in signal degradation. When we know this we can embody it in a tool that will help assess the object of preservation.

Only in recent years has the need been recognized to create new methods and tools for dynamic objects. It required a new understanding from traditional concepts and practices of assessment and prioritization. With static objects the system which is needed to view them is immediately available. Simply stated, the condition of the object of preservation is readily accessible to us with light in the room, our eyes and the object. Audiovisual, or dynamic objects, require a complex system in order to produce the object of preservation - the audiovisual signal. For audiovisual objects we require a skilled operator, quality reproduction equipment, the media which contains the signals and a monitoring device. And not only do we need all of these components, but if they are not working in harmony and with synchronicity, we do not achieve a reproduction with integrity and we are not able to make a meaningful assessment of the object of preservation. Assuming that we do achieve optimal reproduction - as faithful of a reproduction as we are able to achieve - we can then make an assessment of the object of preservation.

Recognition of these facts leads us to a somewhat troubling place. This logic dictates that in order to assess the condition of our object of preservation, we actually need to transport and reproduce the tape. For large collections, any pragmatist would note the extensive resources required to get to this point and scrutinize the viability of such a process.

The time involved in <u>meaningful</u> assessment with the available tools and practices is unquestionably significant. To a major extent this is where the argument for value based prioritization often comes into play.

Here we address the other ambiguous term previously mentioned, "value". The notion that more valuable content should be transferred before less valuable content is within solid reason. The troubling aspect of this argument that I have heard become more present says: *Due to the resources currently required to perform meaningful assessment of dynamic objects that value, and value alone, should be the sole determining factor by which we prioritize.* Looking past the fact that the true nature of content is often unknown until the point of reproduction, the term value as previously mentioned is tricky. The "value-only" argument is based on the false premise that we can accurately predict future value in the present. Value is perception after all and perceptions are constantly shifting. This argument dismisses condition based prioritization on the assumption that the resources required to obtain a condition assessment will not yield a reasonable return on investment over time.

Rather than build a methodology on top of a false premise wouldn't it be more fruitful and meaningful to approach this from the other angle? Let's reduce the resources required to perform a condition assessment of an audiovisual object. Let's close the current gap between information that can be gathered in the static environment and knowledge about the resulting condition of the object of preservation produced in the dynamic environment. We should be using the combination of value, condition and obsolescence as guides for prioritization.

With only recent recognition of the need for better audiovisual assessment tools has the topic warranted the awareness it deserves. Thanks to the work of the six professionals

speaking in this session and the awareness of the funding agencies behind them we have begun - just begun - to delve into solving this problem.

It is important to recognize that we have only scratched the surface. These are the first projects of many to come. There is still a stretch of road ahead. We should not be dissuaded by the difficulty of the task at hand, as the content at risk deserves our utmost diligence. We must maintain awareness and push for continued funding behind research and development of tools and methodologies that will allow us to administer proper collection management over our moving image and sound collections.

In summary -

Where we are coming from:

- Our collections managing us
- Myth, or speculative and anecdotal based solutions
- Using static methods to assess dynamic objects
- Extensive resources required to perform assessment and prioritization
- Answering the question "if" instead of "when" and "how"

The vision:

- Us managing our collections
- Minimal and drastic reduction of resources required to assess an audiovisual object.
- Assessing dynamic objects using methods and tools that represent their dynamic nature
- Tools available to the community based on well-founded, valid scientific data
- Efficient ongoing monitoring and capturing of data
- Answering the questions "when" and "how", not "if"

Where we are now:

- Further on down the road from where we have come and closer to the vision
- Is where the six professionals presenting on this topic today have gotten us.

These professionals and projects represent the major body of recent and current work performed on an international scale in advancing the field toward the vision. I have had the pleasure to work with a few of them on these projects and have followed all of these projects closely. I am honored and privileged to introduce all six speakers today. With that said, I would like to say thanks for your time and introduce Dietrich Schueller.