

The Digital Dilemma

continues

“The images that we capture on film are a universal language for telling the stories of our times. The medium of film is today’s Rosetta Stone which will preserve our stories so future generations will know who we were and what we thought and did.”

Guillermo Navarro, ASC, AMC spoke those words of wisdom while urging his colleagues in the motion picture industry to do what is necessary to preserve today’s films as a legacy for future generations. His plea came in the wake of the publication of *The Digital Dilemma* report published by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in November 2007.

The report was co-authored by preservationist Milt Shefter and Andy Maltz, director of the Academy’s Science and Technology Council. It compared practices, costs and the effectiveness of archiving film and digital media based on interviews with archivists, asset protection managers, decision makers at the Hollywood studios, and a range of science, government, and business organizations all dealing with digital data.



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The findings were unequivocal. Film is the only proven archival medium, and costs for storing and periodically migrating digital media are significantly higher.

A follow-up report to *The Digital Dilemma* will focus on independent filmmakers, documentarians, and public archives. Surveys were sent to members of the Academy’s documentary branch, the International Documentary Association, and the non-fiction branch of the Television Academy. Surveys were also conducted through trade magazines for independent filmmakers and a wide-ranging series of interviews and case studies with archivists. Shefter reports that hundreds of people responded, and several dozen were interviewed.

“There are a few exceptions, but I didn’t find a high level of awareness about archiving issues,” Shefter reports. “The studios are archiving the original negative from film capture and film-outs of master files from born digital or hybrid productions. It typically costs over \$70,000 for the film-out from the digital intermediate process, but they realize that’s their long-term, guaranteed-access preservation record.

“Independent film and documentary producers who want to preserve their films are going to have to follow the same route, but they are going to have to find a less expensive way to do it,” he adds. “Most of the producers whom I spoke to didn’t realize they need to periodically migrate digital master files, and that every time they did some of the data was going to be lost.”

Recently, a couple of contemporary documentarians relied on archival film footage for their projects. The producers of *WWII in HD* found some 3,000 hours of 16mm film in archives and private collections in 35 nations. Most of it was Kodachrome film taken by combat cameramen and civilians 65 to 70 years ago. Some of that archival footage was used to produce the 10-episode documentary series, which aired on the History Channel in HD format.

Frank Martin produced and directed *For Love of Liberty: The Story of America’s Black Patriots*. He found a substantial amount of film in the Library of Congress, the National Archives and other places documenting the role that black soldiers played in the American military. The oldest footage was film of black soldiers marching off to the Spanish-American War with future president Theodore Roosevelt in 1898. *For Love of Liberty* premiered as a two-part, four-hour documentary in HD format on Public Broadcasting Stations (PBS) in the United States.

Lastly, a giant step towards ensuring that an important part of film history will be preserved was taken in March, when Technicolor donated their historic archive dating back to 1915 to the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The museum already houses *Gone With the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz* and other classic movies produced in Technicolor formats.

For more information about *The Digital Dilemma* report, visit www.oscars.org/council.