

Sharing Resources, Sharing Responsibility: Archives in the Digital Age

Bertram Lyons, Nathan Salsburg, Anna Lomax Wood, Association for Cultural Equity / Alan Lomax Archive, New York, USA

In 1960, writing of his 'twenty-year odyssey with cylinder, disc, and tape' in *Hi/Fi Stereo Review*, folklorist Alan Lomax made a prescient observation: that mass communication, centralized education, and increased urbanization could render cultural diversity extinct, leaving in its wake a globe-spanning monoculture. "It is only a few sentimental folklorists like myself who seem to be disturbed by this prospect today," he lamented, "but tomorrow, when it will be too late when the whole world is bored with automated mass-distributed video-music our descendants will despise us for having thrown away the best of our culture." Alan Lomax did not live to see YouTube. Nevertheless, he would have been among the first to appreciate the potential of digital technology as a facilitator of local cultural expression. We also think he would have approved of our use of new technologies to preserve his documentary legacy and ensure its accessibility, and to further his mission of cultural equity. Having digitized Lomax's sound recordings and his still and moving image collections and deposited the originals at the Library of Congress, we have created an on-line archive, which is accessible through searchable catalogs at the website of the Association for Cultural Equity (ACE). Free of the responsibility of caring for the physical materials, ACE now focuses on access, outreach, and collaboration. While these developments allow for flexibility that would have been almost unthinkable 12 years ago, they also require us to consider the essence of this new kind of archive, and what its concerns should be. What is the relationship between our physical and digital collections? How effective is on-line access compared to direct access or networked resource sharing? Are the use and impact of a digital archive worth its cost? What are the most trusted methods for long-term digital storage and content management? What new ethical and legal obligations does the digital age introduce? Should we pursue e-commerce as a means to support our work? How best can we use technological advances to pursue our mission of fostering cultural equity? Our paper describes how we are attempting to answer these questions. It explores the steps we take to stay ahead of changing standards, media, and public interest; to ensure the continued viability and integrity of our archive; and to meet the challenge of Lomax's 1960 article: "It still remains for us to learn how we can put our magnificent mass communication technology at the service of each and every branch of the human family."