

Report on the State of American Television and Video Preservation
Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division
The Library of Congress
Washington D.C. 20540
March 26, 1996

Submission By:

VidiPax Inc.

James Lindner
President
VidiPax Inc.
920 Broadway 15 Floor
New York, N.Y. 10010

I have been fortunate to participate in these proceedings as both a panel member and as a speaker today. I would like to thank the Library of Congress for having these hearings and for allowing me to participate in both of these capacities. In many ways I am fortunate being one of the last speakers in this process. I have had the opportunity of hearing many of the statements of those before me, many of those statements reported on many of the problems associated with saving our video heritage. There is little that I can add of substance in this area. The point has been made many times. Simply put, magnetic media was never designed to last forever, and many institutions and individuals around the world are finding out that their collections are becoming difficult to properly playback for many reasons. We are in serious danger of loosing a significant part of our visual and audio heritage.... but that is very well known now, indeed it was well known before these hearings. I would like my contribution, then, to be to offer some ideas that can be implemented that are reasonable, cost effective, and can actually achieve something.

Before I do, I think that it is important to briefly state my background, and therefore my position and biases on this subject. I am the President of VidiPax Inc. Which is in the magnetic media restoration business. Our company is headquartered in Manhattan, and we employ about 10 people whose main job is to save the materials we speak of for our clients. One of our clients is the Library of Congress, and many of our clients have appeared as witnesses in these proceedings and given statements. Since its formation, VidiPax has saved literally thousands of tapes and have been fortunate to receive awards for our work. We try to publish articles on this subject as broadly as possible to as wide an audience as possible and we also frequently give educational seminars and speeches on an international basis. Our clients come from many different geographical regions, vary from individuals with a single tape of personal interest to mega-media conglomerates that have thousands of tapes that are extremely valuable and document important historic events. We literally have a museum of old equipment that we maintain of many different formats and

we have a storeroom filled with machines that we use largely for parts to keep the main machines running properly. Our staff is well trained, and many of them are young so that the knowledge of how to run this equipment will not be lost. As you know, most of the early operators of the equipment have largely retired at this point in time. Our rates are very reasonable, and we assist artists and independent video makers who are less able to financially afford our services whenever possible. Bottom line, we are a small company that is proud to do very good work. We are not yet profitable, but we can always dream. On a personal level, I am the Chairman of the Board of Anthology Film Archives in New York, a non-profit organization which is one of the largest archives for independent film and video in the world. Anthology has struggled to survive for 25 years and truly is the home of independent film and video. In summary, my experience is in actually restoring magnetic media, and in helping many organizations and individuals that have tapes that they need to play back.

The problems that have been heard in these hearings are large and diverse, and at first blush may seem hopeless. How can one reconcile the diverse needs of independent video producers and art organizations who have barely enough money to pay the phone bill with the needs of large departments of larger corporations whose images (which are known as their assets) literally trace our history for 40 years and are now first starting to realize some income from their investment only to have blatant copyright violations threaten their survival. How does one reconcile the fact that manufacturers have a direct economic incentive to introduce new video formats as technology allows them to offer new and important features to their customers to the plaintive cries of libraries and archives asking for a single Holy Grail video or data format to transfer all of their materials to. These are not neat problems to address and many solutions in fact may work at cross purposes to different groups who all have their specific needs. There are some things that we all share in common, however. We all share the belief that at least some of this work needs to be

saved, and we all share the fact that we are largely dependent on the equipment and tape manufacturers to provide products that are used in the production of video materials in the first place. As an aside, I am extremely disappointed that so few manufacturers that have profited so greatly by making this equipment and selling the tape have participated in this process. Clearly they perceive they have little to gain by participating - after all they have already sold the equipment that has recorded the images, and sold the tape that the images are stored on. Since most archives do not purchase much tape or equipment but rather inherit it, their lack of interest is understandable although it is extremely disappointing. I personally challenge the equipment and tape manufacturers to remove their collective heads from the sand and assist us in saving our visual heritage..... who knows, they actually might make money doing it once they give it a try.

But what is one big need that we all have that the Library of Congress can assist in? We collectively share the need to know more, and the need to make sense and deal with the huge volume of materials that are being generated every day. Clearly the problems are difficult to neatly tie up in a box, and therefore the solutions are similarly ungainly. That does not mean that they are hopeless and therefore should be abandoned for more fertile fields.

Some of the suggestions made during these hearings while laudable are virtually impossible to implement from an economic and political standpoint. Indeed, some of them fall beyond the purview of the Library of Congress and into private industry and other organizations both non-profit and government whose charter is more appropriate. I personally do not feel that it is appropriate for government to compete with the private sector, and if there is a need in the market for restoration and other services, that need will (and has) been responded to in the private sector by companies such as ours. I do think that there are many things that do fall within the grasp of the Library that would make a real and

meaningful contribution, that are relatively simple to implement, and are appropriate to the role of the Library.

One of the biggest needs that we all share is to be able to learn more about the problems that we share in common and some of the solutions that have been offered. Contrary to common belief, there is actually quite a bit of research that has occurred in the past about different aspects of magnetics and magnetic media. To that end, anyone doing research in this area has been frustrated by the difficulty of getting articles and research that has already been published. Many of those periodicals are long out of print, were produced by companies that have long stopped distributing them, appeared in extremely limited circulation publications, or are very technical proceedings of symposia that have occurred on an international basis. As such, a bibliography should be undertaken that broadly examines various aspects of the problems of magnetic media preservation and the associated issues of collection management. Mr. Gerald Gibson of the Library of Congress has produced a document that is a good start, and that effort should be dramatically expanded. Creating a bibliography is one thing, actually being able to find and read the articles is another. Unless one lives in Washington D.C. or has access to a very large university library and had a great deal of time to spare, actually getting your hands on these periodicals (many of which are long out of print from esoteric sources) is a virtual impossibility. If the library could make a collection of these articles and make them electronically available a great service would be provided.

Video materials that are not able to be seen are not of much interest to the general public and therefore die. As such the issue of access is important, but also building an audience for the diversity of our video heritage is extremely important. Screenings of diverse materials to a broad audience across America will develop interest in video that few have seen before. As such, the diversity of video becomes one of its greatest strengths. The Library could

put together a show that traveled to different cities all across America on the cultural history of Television, and could have public screenings be a part of the exhibition. Many for profit organizations would benefit from such a traveling show, and I think that corporate sponsorship, perhaps from some of those organizations that have testified at these hearings is very possible. Such a exhibition could concentrate more on who we are as a people and the impact of Television and video on us as opposed to being a show that simply panders to reruns of 1950's situation comedies. I am sure that many of the smaller archives would be extremely happy to participate in such a project.

Education in my opinion is an appropriate role for the Library of Congress, and unfortunately there is virtually no education of today's video producers and film makers on how to take care of the materials that they handle on a daily basis so that they will survive for the future. Distributing a small brochure to film and video students that outlines why preservation of these materials is important and the role of The Library of Congress in preserving our Audio Visual heritage would be very useful. Further, producing a curriculum outline that could denote one day in a video or film students college education as a media handling and preservation day would be extremely helpful in building awareness and hopefully saving materials that we will be trying to save 15 years from now. Such a curriculum could include a video presentation on how to handle media , on how the materials are manufactured, and even discussing copyright issues from "the source" would, I think, be received extremely well received. Again, I think corporate sponsorship of such an initiative would be quite achievable if it is desired. I for one would be happy to participate in such an effort.

Finally, a plea for the Library of Congress collection itself. If there is an area where a congressional appropriation should be requested, it should be here. The Library simply has far too many materials that are far too valuable for them not to be protected. The task at

hand is far to large for those who are expected to currently do it, and the budget and therefore the effort associated with protection of video within the Library of Congress is minuscule, particularly when compared to the large budget spent on preserving paper documents. Simply put, magnetic media is an orphan even within the Library of Congress. Even with external vendors such as our company, the rate at which the Library of Congress is able to restore its own material is so slow, the resources so small, that much of the material is doomed based on current appropriations. Perhaps "Physician Heal Thy Self" is an appropriate moniker, nevertheless many of the materials that the Library currently has on deposit are already old and in a serious state of deterioration..... I know because we have restored some of them. A delay in restoring them will seal their fate forever.

Finally, I urge the Librarian of Congress to save the materials already within the Libraries custody and to take a leadership position in being a role model for all libraries and collections around the world. Simply put, most Librarians are "paper people" having been trained and having worked with paper for their entire careers. I am not arguing against paper preservation, rather I am arguing FOR magnetic media preservation, and further argue for the inclusion of magnetic media into Library Science and Archival curricula both within the Library and within the academic community at large. It is ironic that those who have been entrusted to save these materials have received virtually no training on how to do it, and are extremely ill equipped to deal with the virtual tidal wave of magnetic media that have already started to inundate their collections. I urge to Library of Congress to take a leadership position and demonstrate to the libraries of the world that libraries are not JUST for books. Librarians, Archivists, and Curators must learn how to preserve and manage the many media types that hold different types of information. I argue for media equality. Our librarians and archivists must embrace all media because their expertise is a vital element in the survival of our cultural heritage.