

AUDIO-VISUAL HERITAGE OF NATION AT RISK

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✘ By Martin Knelman, [The Toronto Star](#), 15 February 2010



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Last week's fire at CTV's Ottawa studio may have seemed like a one-day news story. Instead, consider it a wake-up call not just for the broadcasting industry but for all Canadians. Yes, despite damage of \$2.5 million, the building can be repaired. Lawyers and insurance adjusters can work out who pays what to replace damaged equipment.

What cannot be fixed is the long-term damage done through the loss of archival material. This was not just any TV studio. It was for decades home base for a major network in our national capital. So far, we don't know the details of what was lost – and we may never know.

Canada has fallen shockingly far behind the rest of the developed world in preserving the precious audio-visual heritage of its radio and TV broadcasting history. But apparently not enough people know or care about this situation to bring it to the top of anyone's political agenda.

The upshot: The priceless legacy of our national history, as recorded over the past 80 years in our electronic media, is slipping away.

A number of eloquent champions who established the Canadian Broadcast Museum Foundation in 2001 have been trying to create a museum that captures the exciting story of Canadian broadcasting – which one of our pioneers, Graham Spry, once described as "the central nervous system of the country."

Despite the dedication of the foundation, the dream has yet to be realized.

Meanwhile, valuable material continues to go missing. The CBC, facing budget cuts, purged its shelves of outtakes that likely included material of historic value. In Victoria, a private station discovered that news footage compiled from 1956 to 1998 had deteriorated beyond repair because of faulty storage conditions.

No country in the world has relied so heavily on communication for its continued existence. In the words of Knowlton Nash, a major force in the history of CBC news: "The soul of Canada lies in our history of talking to each other across the vast and challenging expanse of our geography."

Yet despite being a world leader in using radio and TV to build the country, we don't qualify for an

Olympic medal when it comes to preserving that heritage. In fact, we rank close to the bottom.

In Australia, federal funds of \$25 million annually enable the National Film and Sound Archives to collect, preserve and provide public access to the country's audio-visual heritage. In France, public funds of \$150 million support a national audio-visual institute that maintains a national radio and TV archive.

In Canada, with minimal funding from a number of industry and government partners, the broadcasting foundation has articulated the mandate, developed a coalition and built a collection of 16,000 broadcast artifacts. But the required great leap forward can't occur until the deposit of all material at a central agency (comparable to the U.S. Library of Congress) becomes mandatory for all broadcasters. And then a substantial annual budget would be needed to build and maintain an archive.

Ideally, this would culminate with a national museum supported by the federal government – but that can't happen until we recognize that our electronic artifacts are as valuable as art objects and the printed word.

Here's how foundation board member Roger Abbott (of the Royal Canadian Air Force) puts it: "When a museum finds the right way to display dinosaurs, lots of people come in to look at the bones."

But first, let's save all the bones that have not yet been lost.

