



How Big a Problem Do We Have?

Collected by Kim Schroeder, Wayne State University and Archive Media Partners

RESPONDER'S COMMENTS

"In the digital realm, we are seeing a lack of resources available to migrate interactive works created for CDROM and interactive installations to current operating systems and hardware configurations."

"I am very concerned about this topic since there is such fear and resistance (as well as misinformation) present in the archival community. Many are avoiding dealing with older formats/electronic records, which only intensifies the problem as the formats rapidly become obsolete."

"I work in the audio archival dept. of a major motion picture studio. The recent but obsolete digital audio formats are a serious problem. The hardware is no longer supported and the media itself has degraded much faster than the analog formats that preceded them."

"We are just beginning to record loss for the four collections we have "processed" as part of the AIMS Project grant - so far it ranges between 6% and 67% (for a collection of 20 year-old hard drives)."

"Currently we set digital media aside for some unknown future date rather than processing. Material not lost, but has potential for loss due to inaction."

"Information received on CDs is no longer accessible -- either media failure or data failure during the copying process."

"We have earlier original research data on obscure media or punch cards that may or may not have been migrated to other media or published prior to transfer to the Archives. It's impossible to know for sure what's been lost though."

"We have not actually lost any information. However, there does appear to be only 1-2 people in UK with machines that can play our most obscure format."

"Some 5 1/4 floppies wouldn't open and we lost several years of meeting minutes."

"We have lost more video content from a RAID failure than from not being able to read an obsolete format."

"We have many valuable machine-dependent formats and recordings which will be lost as historical evidence if we are unable to play them, or uncertain of their priority for reformatting or migration."

CONTACT

Kim Schroeder
Wayne State University / Archive Media Partners
Email: kim@archivemediapartners.com
Phone: 313-963-6355
Website: www.archivemediapartners.com
Twitter: [archivemedia](https://twitter.com/archivemedia)

INTRODUCTION

There are a multitude of professional surveys out there to determine what types of obsolete formats archives are struggling with. As part of researching an article, we sent out a request on the AMIA and Archives Lists to ask "How Big a Problem Do We Have?" This intent was to informally examine the level of concern that archivists have for this transitory media.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Two inquires went out via the listservs on June 6th and June 13th, 2011. Survey Monkey was used to gather the responses. This was primarily due to its ease of use for responders.

% Archive unable to read/play/open	Respondents
Less than 5%	41.9%
5-10%	34.1%
15-20%	11.6%
25-35%	9.4%
40-90%	3.2%

Table 1. Percentage of Your Archive Media

Broad Formats	Percentages
Audio All Formats	11.9%
Video All Formats	29.4%
Digital Files All Formats	20.7%
Discs All Formats	25.0%
Data Tapes All Formats	2.2%
Film All Formats	7.6%
Photo All Formats	3.3%

Table 2. Broader Categories of Most Desired Conversions

RESULTS

The response to the survey was strong with 129 respondents offering great insight, statistics and commentary. In Table 1, we see that the percentage of a collection that archivists are unable to read/play/open is significant. Taking into consideration that those responding would be more likely to be concerned about obsolete formats, it still represents a likely sample of over 100 institutions. We feel that this is a dramatic representation. The overwhelming message when asked "What would be your most desired type of media to be able to read/play/open?" was access to a plethora of types of media. Thirty five different formats were mentioned varying from general "Videotapes" to answering "All".

Only two formats were repeatedly mentioned and they were 3/4" videotape and floppies (of varying types). For floppies sometimes a size was mentioned but more often none was specified. Of those listed, the typical 5.25", 3.5" and the more rare 8 inch was indicated.

It appears that a few misinterpreted the question and answered it as if the question was "What is your desire for optimal read/play/access?" If clarified to these respondents, this might result in a decrease in Chart 1 for CDs, although several mentioned CD failures as a problem.

In categorizing the data into greater types, Table 2 shows the breakdown with the largest concern being video, all types of discs (floppy to hard drive) and digital files (various types). Chart 1 illustrates the detail in the varying formats of what each respondent would desire to read/play/open.

CONCLUSION

One predominant issue with planning for obsolete formats is the variance within each institution as to its mix of content, significance and formats. This study shines a light on the diversity of formats as a core problem in and of itself. Several responders felt unable to answer questions because they had such little information about the content, quality and type of information contained on these obsolete formats. When asked if "digital obsolescence affected their institution?" many suspected the answer to be "yes" but had little ability to know for sure. Many others mentioned that they were aware of loss but had never been able to process the obsolete data so there was a complete lack of knowledge as to what was lost.

All vital historic content has never been retained, but in the past archives had more mechanisms to evaluate content received than we currently do. The transition to temporal storage and access media has changed our ability not only to store, manage and preserve material but to record history.

The archival world needs to develop real-world plans with checklists and collaboration to utilize existing hardware/software systems, in order to read/play/open content. Without this plan being put quickly into place increased loss will continue and utility to the historic record is in jeopardy.

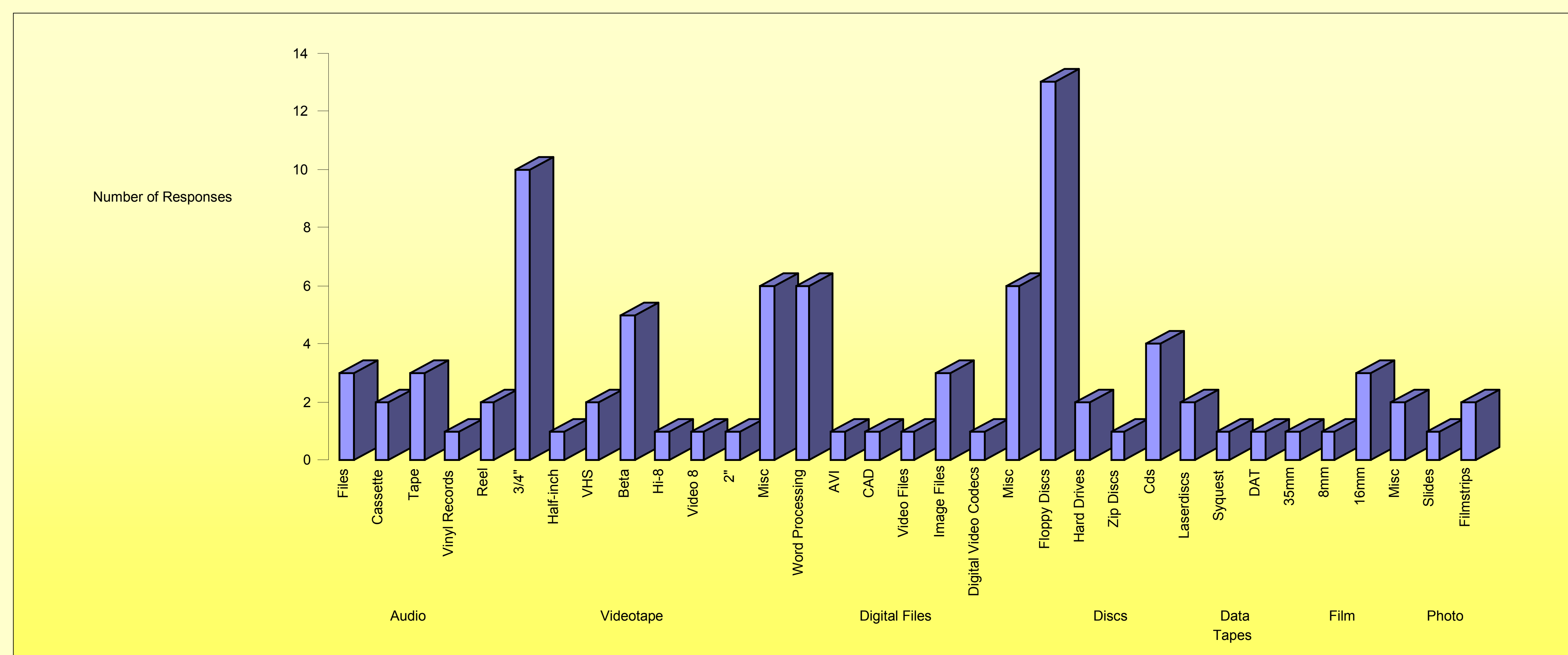


Chart 1. Chart of Most Desired Types of Media to Read/Play/Open