

The Nordic Model of Digital Archiving

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Chapter 13

Private audiovisual media archives in Greenland

A case study of TV-Aasiaat's audiovisual
archives from the 1990s

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Introduction

“In the recent years audiovisual heritage has been increasingly recognised as a vital resource for political, historical, and social research to name a few. In several countries audiovisual material i.e. film, video, and audio, have gained full recognition as part of their cultural heritage” (Laas 2009, 4). Thus begins Piret Laas master’s thesis from the University of Iceland, which examines inventory, storage, and digitisation at the country’s ten audiovisual archives. In the neighbouring country of Greenland, however, the importance of audiovisual (AV) heritage is not yet recognised.

This chapter considers Greenlandic AV material as cultural heritage by examining records from the 1990s of one local television (TV) station, TV-Aasiaat. These recordings constitute both tangible culture in the physical AV recordings themselves, and intangible culture, in the storytelling that they record. Storytelling traditions in Greenland reach back to time out of mind; AV records are one manifestation of this essential cultural form. Nonetheless, the framework for the preservation of cultural heritage in Greenland is focused on the tangible, material culture of built heritage and documentary or archival heritage.

AV materials convey storytelling and visual representations of people and places that have changed since the time of recording, using technology that is itself constantly changing. Such technological change means that AV recordings, sometimes after only a short time, are not immediately accessible, because they require outdated equipment for playback. This problem is most often addressed by migrating non-digital AV records into digital formats. This chapter will argue for the importance of preserving historic TV footage as part of Greenlandic cultural heritage because it tells the story of modern Greenland and discuss the possibilities for digitisation of media archives in Greenland.

A short history of media in Greenland

In the late twelfth century the Inuit ancestors of today's Greenlanders migrated from the North American arctic to Greenland. European colonisation of Greenland began with the arrival of the Danish-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede to West Greenland in 1721, where the Danish-Norwegian Kingdom granted him permission to establish his mission station. East Greenland and Thule were colonised around 1900. In 1953 a new Danish constitution incorporated Greenland as a county (*amt*) within the Kingdom of Denmark, intensifying the cultural and economic colonisation of Greenland even as it signalled the beginning of its political decolonisation. Until 1953 the main language in Greenland was Kalaallisut; only a few Greenlanders knew some Danish. After 1953 a rapid modernisation/Danification process took off. The aim was to give Greenlanders the same status as Danes, but the rapid modernisation process was based on Denmark as a model and included institutionalised education with Danish as the language of instruction. It only took a decade to realise that Danification threatened Kalaallisut and the Indigenous ethnic-national identity of Greenland. In 1979 Greenlanders gained Home Rule and a process of Greenlandization began therefrom, including use of Kalaallisut as the national language. Self-government replaced Home Rule in 2009, on the way towards independence (Langgård 2011, 120).

Before print and broadcast media came to Greenland, communication consisted of face-to-face interaction and a tradition of oral storytelling. In 1861, the first newspaper *Atuagaglliutit* was established, publishing entertainment, travelogues, news, translated fiction such as *Robinson Crusoe*, and oral traditional stories at the request of editor H. J. Rink (1819–1893). The public service station Grønlands Radio (later: Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa, KNR) was created in 1958 and TV was introduced in 1966. TV programmes from the public service station in Denmark, DR1, were taped and shown via TV associations. This illegal practice ended in 1982, when the national broadcasting service KNR-TV was established. In 1997, the Internet came to Greenland and since then, slowly but surely, became part of daily life (Rygaard 2011, 535–536). In a nation of small communities separated by vast distances, it is important to have national and local TV stations telling stories and to sustain Greenlandic culture amidst international media, including Danish media.

Lack of legislation for AV archiving in Greenland

Although Greenland has legislation to protect built heritage, historic sites, parklands, and documentary heritage, it lacks legislation to protect intangible culture. *Inatsisartut Act No. 11* of 19 May 2010 deals with preservation and protection of physical or material cultural heritage, including archaeological sites, historical buildings, and cultural historical sites. This law only applies to material culture and does not address intangible culture or cultural heritage

such as AV materials. The first paragraph of the act notes that the legislation “must protect the uniqueness and variety of Greenland’s national monuments as part of Greenland’s cultural heritage in order to contribute to an understanding of Greenland’s cultural history ... These national monuments are evidence of human activity over millennia. They help to create a connection between past and present and make visible the societies that created them” (Greenland 2010). The second paragraph continues: “The Inatsisartut act makes it part of a Greenlandic national responsibility to take care of its cultural heritage as a cultural resource, as a source of scientific inquiry and as a lasting basis for the experience, self-understanding, well-being and business of current and future generations” (ibid.). Since the legislation only focuses on material cultural heritage, it can be considered one-sided, and there is a risk that immaterial or intangible culture will not be preserved for future generations.

Similarly, *Inatsisartut Act No. 5* of 3 June 2015, on archives, states: “All information-bearing material [records] created or provided in connection with the activities of public institutions must be archived” (Greenland 2015). This legislation is similar to Danish archival legislation and serves as a strong basis for preserving the official records of the government but is less effective at preserving private records. While the national public broadcasting corporation KNR is covered by this legislation, AV records created by private and local TV associations are not. Such AV records offer a means of understanding everyday life in communities from around Greenland and represent a contemporary instance of traditional Greenlandic storytelling.

These records are at risk. The lifespan of a VHS (Video Home System) videotape is defined as the length of time that the tape can be stored until it becomes unplayable. For example, a tape stored at 20 degrees Celsius with relative humidity of 50% will stay playable for up to 30 years. But when the room temperature is increased by five degrees, the lifespan of the recording will decrease by ten years. At a temperature of around ten degrees, the tapes will have the best possible chance of a longer lifespan, but only up to a maximum of 64 years at the longest (Van Bogart 1995, 35).

Looking abroad

Greenland’s neighbouring country, Iceland, has recognised this situation and has over the last 15 years been digitising their AV records. Piret Laas’ 2009 master thesis, “Preserving the national heritage: Audiovisual collections in Iceland,” is a study of ten different institutions’ AV collections and their status in relation to digitisation and preservation. Laas includes three different TV stations and discusses their handling of AV archives, including how the material is stored, categorised, digitised, how copyright is addressed, and which staff members are responsible for archiving. In Laas’ case study of the private TV station Stöd 2, founded in 1986, it is explained that the records are on storage media such as U-matic and VHS videotapes, DVDs, and servers.

Non-digital formats including U-matic and VHS are often stored in only one copy. Since these tapes were expensive, they were sometimes reused and some broadcasts were deleted, under the authority of the general director. The broadcaster does not have a preservation strategy, but in 2008 they reported that their archives contained 18,537 items (the archives did not provide a measurement in hours). In 2008, Stöd 2 had no plan for systematic digitisation, and only digitised records when they were needed. Staff at Stöd 2 wished to digitise their records to free up space in their physical archive (Laas 2009, 121–124). Things are different in Iceland’s national public broadcaster Ríkisútvarpið, or RÚV. As early as 2007 in its public service contract RÚV was required to preserve its records:

- 1 RÚV is obliged to preserve original radio and TV programs for the future. It is the role of the RÚV to preserve all material of cultural heritage value as well as broadcast material characteristic of the RÚV production during each time-period, not covered by the Legal Deposit Act No. 20/200.
- 2 RÚV is obliged to compile a schedule by December 31st, 2007, for the transfer of older broadcast material, e.g. records, tapes, and films, to accessible carriers for preservation and future usage (Iceland “Samningur um útvarpsþjónustu í almannapágu”, March 23, 2007).

In Iceland, there is a difference between national and private TV collections in relation to legislation and prioritisation of their AV archives. As in Greenland, the public broadcaster is required to preserve its records, while private stations are not. Nonetheless, Laas (2009) found that the private TV station Stöd 2 was digitising its non-digital recordings for its own operational reasons, both to make records available for re-broadcast and to free up space in their physical archive.

Denmark provides another example. In 2007 the Danish public broadcaster, DR, drew up a plan to digitise its radio and TV archives, at an estimated cost of DKK 150 million (Kulturministeriet 2006). This project was completed in 2017; DR announced the news on February 9, 2017 with the headline: “DR’s archives are now digitalized” noting that “around 70% of all radio and television materials in DR’s archives and approximately 140,000 press photos and other historic photographs have been digitized” (Stubbe-Teglbjærg 2017). The decision to digitise 70%, rather than all, of the archive was based on a selection strategy that considered the importance of the footage, whether anyone would find it interesting, the survivability of different formats, and so on. After the end of the project, DR toured Denmark to share its now digitised archive (*ibid.*).

AV materials from TV associations are private archives in Greenland

When Greenland’s KNR-TV was created in the 1980s, DR was the most important cooperating partner. This collaboration declined as KNR-TV

became more and more independent and when DR's competitor, TV-2, was created in 1988 (Fleischer 2023: 209). Even today, DR's three TV programmes continue to be shown in Greenland, demonstrating that the collaboration has not ended.

As noted above, KNR is required to preserve its records under Greenland's archival legislation as a publicly funded agency. The latest public service contract for KNR, for 2019–2022, has a section on electronic archiving, where digitisation is mentioned as exceeding KNR's current budget: "A rapid and complete digitisation of the radio/TV broadcasts will be very costly and will require a separate grant. During the contract period, the Department and KNR must work to find funds for digitalisation" (Naalakkersuisut/KNR 2019). This search for funds was successful; the entire radio and TV archive of KNR is undergoing digitisation with the support of the private Danish A.P. Møller Fund, who donated DKK 2 million over 2021–2024 (A.P. Møller Fonden 2021). This digitisation of audio and AV materials is the first of its kind in Greenland. However, KNR-TV's archives have been affected by water damage and mold in the buildings they have occupied since the start of TV in 1982, to the detriment of part of the stored productions and other records (Simonsen interview, March 4, 2022). Moreover, at the time of the first KNR national TV broadcast, on November 1, 1982, there were 25 local TV associations around Greenland (Rygaard 2004, 167). These local TV associations have produced TV programmes ever since, but their records are considered private archives, and are not included as part of KNR's archive, not encompassed by the archival legislation, and not part of the current digitisation project. Instead, it is up to the TV associations themselves to donate their archives to the national archives or to a local archives, which is usually a subdivision of a local museum. The now-closed local TV association in Aasiaat (a small town on the western coast of Greenland with approximately 3,500 inhabitants; the main town in the area) chose to transfer their AV records to the local museum.

AV records from TV-Aasiaat, 1992–1993

I visited Aasiaat on fieldwork in summer 2020, to locate TV footage from the early 1980s. The idea for this expedition came when I read in an old TV programme that local TV associations were responsible for six broadcasts a week when KNR-TV started up in 1982. Upon contacting the KNR-TV archive, archive and programme staff explained that all TV recordings from local TV associations had been sent back to the local associations due to copyright issues, after being shown on national TV.

I made two visits to Aasiaat. I initially approached the local radio station, as the TV department was already closed by that time. An employee of the radio station explained that the archives had been handed over to the local museum after being stored for years in an unheated container. The

local museum had space for storage, but in their registration system it was not possible to search for particular footage. It took a few days to locate TV-Aasiaat's AV material. When the tapes were found, there was not much material from the early 1980s, which was the goal of the fieldwork. Furthermore, the 1980s content was on U-matic tapes, and the available player lacked some necessary cables to watch the recordings. Turning to their VHS tapes, I selected content that could have been shown on KNR at the time. The earliest VHS tape was from 1992. When played, it became clear that due to improper storage the tapes are in the process of disintegration; and in fact, are in such poor condition that they will soon disappear as cultural heritage. There are around 50 or 60 VHS tapes in total, usually three hours long each, of which I examined ten. Only a small part of the ten VHS tapes I examined are in fine quality without noise. Almost all the other tapes are damaged.

I reviewed the contents of the VHS tapes retrieved from the local museum in Aasiaat from oldest to newest, after returning to Nuuk. The oldest tapes are from 1992 and the newest are from 1998. I was able to view nine tapes in total from the years 1992–1993. The oldest tape is from the winter of 1992, and there are 11 recordings, made in different locations and at different times, on the tape. This tape includes the following recordings:

The first recording is an interview with Piitaaraq Brandt, who planned to travel around the whole Greenland either skiing or by kayak. The uncut conversation addressed his previous travels and his plans for new travels over the next three years. Approx. 40 minutes duration.

The next recording is an interview with the association of choirs in North Greenland, about their general meeting in the town of Qasigiannugit. A choir singing is also shown. Approx. 30 minutes duration.

The third clip shows a choir singing in Aasiaat's church. Approx. 4 minutes.

The fourth clip shows the choir gathering in Aasiaat's sports hall, and includes songs, speeches and entertainment. Approx. 10 minutes.

The fifth clip is an experiment by the technician who tests the camera's capabilities. Approx. 15 minutes.

The sixth clip is an uncut interview with two employees from the Greenlandic house in Odense, Denmark, who are traveling in Greenland with a cultural performance. 25 minutes.

The seventh clip shows the workers' union's 40th anniversary in Aasiaat and includes an interview with Arne Rafaelsen about what will happen during the celebrations. 20 minutes.

The eighth clip shows footage of Aasiaat's harbor, without voiceover. Approx. 5 minutes.

The ninth clip briefly shows TV-Aasiaat's general assembly. Approx. 2 minutes.

The tenth clip is recorded in TV-Aasiaat's studio with studio host journalist Carl Berthel Lyngge, where he addresses vandalism in the town and problems associated with it. 3 minutes.

The last clip shows a cross-country race in Aasiaat. Approx. 10 minutes.

The other tapes have a mixture of stories like this oldest tape from 1992. The VHS tapes in general relay video snapshots of a broad number of subjects of events that happened in Aasiaat during the 1990s (Figure 13.1).

Looking at the content of the Aasiaat tapes from a genre perspective, they are much like other local news shows, mixing the unusual and everyday life. A closer look at the content of the tapes allows insights into the sights, sounds, and stories of Greenlandic life in the early 1990s and, of great importance, are in Kalaallisut. A closer look at the content may reveal what content, talking about everyday public life in a small community in West Greenland, is in danger of disappearing.

Piitaaraq Brandt and a partner start their trip around Greenland on skis from Aasiaat to Tasiusaq in the north of the town Upernavik, in the winter and spring of 1992. The recording begins with Piitaaraq building a sledge to be used for the trip and ends as they depart on their journey.



Figure 13.1 Children welcoming the return of the sun, Aasiaat, January 1993. The VHS tape is visibly damaged.

Another shows events in connection with an alcohol-free week, including a theatre group of young people staging a play about a dysfunctional family; a broadcast on prevention, with expert interviews and vox pop; nationwide prevention material is criticised by a young woman for being too violent in its images and choice of words. The main events during alcohol-free week were covered by TV-Aasiaat first with a presentation of the programme of the week. The events of the week are followed and then concluded with a discussion by three citizens who evaluate the events.

Coastal passenger ship *Saqqit Ittuk* is launched in Aasiaat. A reception on the ship was filmed, with speeches from the captain and Aasiaat's mayor Knud Sørensen, and an interview with the ship's staff.

Municipal council meetings and municipal elections, together with election videos. The municipality's employees offer presentations on the budget, talking about how private finances should be handled to avoid debt to public institutions. Speeches from the mayor and municipal council discussions on various topics. The election videos vary; some candidates present themselves without background images, while others made videos with involvement of the town's citizens and actual images from different locations in the town. The selection procedure is explained by a woman who reads out a text in the TV studio.

A programme about local stores in Aasiaat after Brugseni's closure in 1991; the current Pisiffik then-named KNI (Greenlandic stores). There was also a programme about a conference, with the participation of national politicians, on the restructuring of KNI.

Sports events in the town were also broadcasted, such as the Greenlandic championship (GM in Danish) in cross-country skiing in 1992 and the dog sledge qualifications for the Greenlandic national championship. Badminton players arrive by plane after finishing the GM in another city, where they have done well; a reception for the athletes in the municipality. Some private footage of a children's taekwondo GM from Nuuk.

Artist Thue Christiansen interviewed about his recent decoration of a school for young adults; how he got the ideas for the motifs; the importance to him of combining traditional hunters' culture and modern culture in the decorations.

Traditional events in the town are also featured, such as national day events, where one of the clips shows two teams competing in Greenlandic football (using a football made of sealskin), a sport that is rarely played nowadays. Christmas events in Aasiaat's sports hall for the town's citizens and another feature about children celebrating the return of the sun, January 1993.

Special events and guests in Aasiaat are filmed, including an interview with the theatre group Silamiut, who were in town for a show and to teach. A group of children on a study trip from Ummannaq's settlement.

Short recordings that do not fit into the above categories include a debate programme on education with interviews of young people; water skiing in Aasiaat's harbour area, in a recording without voiceover; the very first

business conference in the town; a course for hunters and fishermen on financial management; a full-length TV bingo; and, at last, a team of researchers tagging narwhales with GPS transmitters. This last footage was filmed somewhere other than Aasiaat, on a ship, and includes footage from a house in North Greenland with a man playing the accordion.

Such recordings could be of interest to many institutions and researchers but are most important to citizens of Aasiaat. These precious AV records are degrading. The only way to save the recordings is by digitisation.

Initially, the national public service TV, KNR-TV, provided TV primarily from Denmark's DR1. This was TV produced in Denmark, about Danish issues. In 1992 KNR broadcasted approximately 43 minutes in Kalaallisut for every 4 hours and 45 minutes in other languages (mainly Danish or English) (Rygaard 2011, 173), meaning that only 10–15% was in Kalaallisut. It is of utmost importance for Greenland to sustain its own culture, including archiving its own media in Kalaallisut and preserving it, especially because the media landscape has been dominated by imported materials mainly from Denmark and other European nations. The clips that I have introduced in this chapter from the local TV association in Aasiaat offer an essential record of Greenlandic life, spoken in Kalaallisut. In the words of the Inatsisartutlov about preservation of the Greenlandic cultural heritage they contribute to “self-understanding, well-being, and business of current and future generations. Greenland's cultural heritage and as a contribution to an understanding of Greenland's cultural history” (Greenland 2010), and ought to be preserved as part of Greenland's cultural heritage. It is a postcolonial paradox that due to Greenlandic legislation modelled on the Danish archives act and other Danish legislation about cultural heritage prioritising the material cultural heritage, one of the most Greenlandic parts of cultural heritage may not be preserved for future generations.

Concluding remarks

This review of the archives of the local TV association in Aasiaat shows only a small part of the records created by the local TV associations that have existed throughout the country from the 1970s until today. These records are considered to be private archives and are not covered by the archival legislation. Moreover, these non-digital AV records are in danger of degrading past recovery if they are not digitised soon – theoretically beginning within three years, and of being completely degraded in 23 years.

This preservation of Greenland's intangible cultural heritage, in the form of private AV materials, has no legal basis, although Greenland's act on the Preservation and Protection of Cultural Heritage of Cultural Memorials from 2010 states: “The Inatsisartut act is part of the national responsibility to take care of the cultural heritage as a cultural resource, as a scientific source material and as a lasting basis for the experience, self-understanding, well-being and

business of current and future generations.” The focused work of EU countries and Greenland’s neighbouring country Iceland to ensure the preservation of AV materials for future generations has influenced Greenland only insofar as KNR has secured the digitisation of its audio and AV records through a grant from a Danish foundation. If the records of TV-Aasiaat and other local TV associations are to be preserved, the spirit and not just the letter of Greenland’s archives legislation must be observed, so that this essential record can be preserved for future generations to come. AV material is modern storytelling of Greenland.

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