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Archives and Access in the 21st Century



by Rick Prelinger

Some 30 years ago moving image archives began migrating from the fringes of media culture towards the center. For some (but not all) collections, mainstreaming has brought wealth and fame, visibility and allure. Scholarly work built on the archival record is increasing, mass media is redolent with archival images and sounds, and a growing number of "archives fans" regard once-obscure repositories as exciting, relevant, and culturally hip institutions. But while the archival hour may be at hand, the sustainability and survival of archival institutions are far from certain. The reasons are both extrinsic and intrinsic to archives. Many institutions sequester their holdings behind walls of copyright, policy, or indifference, rendering them inaccessible to many. Quick Web searches are replacing deep archival research, and most archival materials are not online. Copyright maximalism, a reluctance to embrace technology, and resistance to providing public access are marginalizing moving image archives at the very moment when they might otherwise be addressing massive new audiences and building new constituencies.

What is it about moving images that problematizes archival practice? How can we turn risks into opportunities in the twenty-first century archives? How can archivists embrace new public roles and put the stereotype of the reclusive, dust-covered repository to rest? And how can scholars, the canonical beneficiaries of archives, help them to reconcile legacy practices and new cultural functions?

While the "classical" moving image archives may have theoretically accepted the indivisibility of its two primary missions, preservation and access, archivists tended to privilege preservation. This was perfectly logical. For moving image archives, access has always been a sticky door. Free and open access was potentially against the law (for certain copyrighted materials) and insupportably expensive (when staffing was short, budgets inadequate, or equipment lacking). Allowing access to formerly private collections contravened contracts (if donor restrictions governed). Many moving image archives held materials covertly, without explicit authorization, again making access to materials risky.

In fact, excepting a few exemplary institutions, access to most moving image collections is still minimal. As many scholars know, archival access requires viewing a film on the premises, using special flatbed editing tables on which fast forward has been disabled, with five days' notice to pull material. Access is often restricted

to accredited scholars working on projects that the archives' director deems useful. Outside North America, access can sometimes be even more difficult.

More broadly, institutions still tend to define access in reductive terms. It is no longer accurate to thematize demand for archival moving image access primarily as a scholarly phenomenon (with a bit of added interest from DVD publishers). Access is, in fact, a spectrum of possible use, ranging from in-house viewing to full online availability with reuse permission—from scholarly use to uninhibited public use. Just as media production is dramatically shifting from institutionally based practices to individual activities, so is interest in archives (and, for that matter, archival practice itself). The fan community, the production community, the blogger, the independent scholar, and the genealogist are all discovering the density, evidentiary value, and vividness of archival imagery and sound... and they are knocking at the archive door. Many archives now report that scholarly research requests now lag well behind production research requests, and some archivists feel themselves turning into stock footage librarians.

On its face, this would seem to represent the long-awaited social validation of moving image archives, marginalized for so long compared to textual and fine-arts collections. One would imagine that archivists would be enthusiastic about their new popularity. But this is not always so. I find it unsettling, for instance, that some archivists continue to debate the ethics of making collections available to “just anyone” because of the possible dangers of “misuse” (read “improper” contextualization). Imagining themselves quite literally as “keepers” of culture, some archivists are still choosing a rarefied and restricted path. Archival listservs are filled with anxious questions about copyright and clearances. Often questions are answered by alarmists who suggest setting absurdly high barriers to access or reuse. Loaded phrases such as “copyright infringement” and “losing control of collections” perpetuate feelings of anxiety and caution, doing a disservice to many patrons whose projects might be significant contributions to scholarship or public culture. Institutionally, archival access is overwhelmingly crippled by an overzealous application of the precautionary principle.

And yet millions of archival access events occur daily, quite outside the realm of archives. Prototypes of twenty-first century moving image archives are already with us, but they are mostly not archival institutions. Though legacy moving image archives still perform the lion's share of preservation, most appear to have conceded leadership in access to Web services (YouTube, myspace.com video, Internet Archive, and dozens of others), most blithely unconcerned by questions of persistence, ownership, standards, sustainability, or accountability. Services of this kind powerfully engage younger media makers, enabling rapid (if visually degraded) access to a plethora of material, permitting personalized and networked tagging and annotation, linking contributors and users in increasingly complex social networks, and privileging remixing and recontextualization in ways that the typical PBS producer of the 1990s would have hardly imagined. While more traditional moving image archives continue to cling to traditional velvet-curtain channels of presenting

their holdings, these new services meld viewer-generated video with longitudinal slices of every kind of moving image material ever produced. The younger public now thinks of moving image archives as kaleidoscopic online collections where access is replaced by automatic ingest and metadata by user-generated tags.

The long-awaited dream of a universal media distribution system is here, albeit in perfectible form. Online digital distribution is no longer just a preview medium or a gimmick, but a primary channel equal to Netflix and Landmark Theaters. While the new online video sites have little in common with classical moving image archives and do not seek to force their forebears out of business, they deliver many millions of digital objects every day to millions of dispersed patrons. These new sites lead to a public misperception about what archives ought to be doing and what they actually do. This may mean that fewer younger scholars and media makers look to established archives for research and production. It is also likely to cause some archives to retrench, to become more closed to newer kinds of access and use (as a way of differentiating from online parvenus). It will be up to moving image archives to resolve this disjunction.

Most of the comprehensive online video sites are also controlled by large corporations, and the commercial sites are moving in the direction of exclusive content partnerships with networks and studios. It is quite likely that the ownership and content profiles of major online video sites will soon mirror the corporate taxonomy of the entertainment industry. This means that the quasi-archival functions fulfilled by online video sites today may be regarded as temporary. No corporation, not even a Google or a Disney, can be regarded as permanent, and quite often no one takes responsibility for maintaining corporate assets when ownership changes or companies disappear. The online sites that today function as near copyright-free zones are likely to tighten up their access and collections policies as they become more integrated into mainstream media. DRM (digital rights management) is becoming more pervasive as well, and it is well-established that electronic locks and keys are inconsistent with archival preservation and access. Interoperability between collections is a growing concern: the near-future scholar or mediamaker should be able to intermix materials from, say, YouTube, the BBC Creative Archive, the Library of Congress American Memory Project, and the Internet Archive, but it is not yet clear that this will be possible. The few active nonprofit repositories, such as the Internet Archive, have adopted many of the positive practices of offline libraries and archives, but are poorly capitalized and dropping behind in the race for content.

Where is the way out? Can these contradictions be reimagined as opportunities? I believe so, but this is unlikely to happen through unguided evolution. Some of the productive (if sometimes disruptive) factors influencing archives promise change, and there are opportunities for productive intervention on the part of scholars. Here, in no particular order, is a kind of inventory:

- An active periphery of moving image archives has become the most significant incubator of new ideas and practices. Diverse institutions and noninstitutional

archival activities populate this area, including individual collectors, regionally focused archives (see Karan Sheldon's piece in this "In Focus" section), local archival projects and workshops, some stock footage houses that hold materials of archival value, arts institutions and media centers, and collections focused on documents by and about historically disadvantaged and/or exploited communities. For many on the periphery, DIY ("do-it-yourself") functions as both ethic and survival strategy, and the periphery itself adds a needed element of decentralism to America's archival culture. Most of the images and sounds collected on the periphery have not received attention from large, traditional archives until recently, but now the inner circle closely monitors the outer. This has led, for instance, to an alliance between the Library of Congress and the young Center for Home Movies; to the preservation of over 600 ephemeral "orphaned" films through the efforts of the NFPPF; to LC's acquisition of the Prelinger Archives collection of advertising, educational, and industrial films; and to the Internet Archive's organization of a large nonprofit public repository that now includes some 170,000 moving image documents. Peripheral institutions continue to spring up and enjoy different measures of longevity, but have a major effect on archival practice. Many have been organized by scholars or enjoy their active participation. Here is a case where scholars, if they perceive unmet needs, can affect the evolution of archival practice and behavior.

- Copyright maximalism and the tightening web of control over cultural content continue to engender significant opposition. Those seeking to avoid inconvenient laws have created new channels (e.g., file-sharing sites, members-only downloadable archives) for the distribution and exchange of elusive or otherwise unavailable material. Though these channels are likely to be unsustainable in the long run, they have functioned to make many works available to scholars, students, and fans of marginal styles. The "copyright wars" are also stimulating a broad-based reassessment of intellectual property law and a critique of the increasing imbalance between holders of rights and users of works, especially within digital culture. One consequence of this reexamination has been the mainstreaming of the commons concept and the efflorescence of communitarian cultural experiments such as the Creative Commons. In the academic world, these efforts are mirrored by many open-access initiatives (regrettably, all too many of them in the sciences) that aim to bring increased openness and availability to scholarly communication. Open access would seem especially apropos for cinema/media studies, as its field is of great interest to nonacademic audiences. Perhaps one day a peer-reviewed open-access cinema studies journal will be a career-enhancing alternative for scholars who now must publish in comparatively expensive, limited-access journals. I cite this because I wonder whether more open publication of work dependent on archival access might help reassure archives of the value of open access.

- A new generation of "emerging archivists," notably but not exclusively trained in new professional moving image archival training programs, is infusing the field with new perspectives and is often unafraid to look to the periphery for ideas. Working in both established and newer organizations, this group is adept at identifying

poorly examined areas of moving image history and culture and deploying themselves as scholars or preservationists. They are characterized by populism, an interest in community-based projects and the building of community through collections, and technophilia. Many emerging archivists are trained in cinema/media studies, and several of the new archival training programs at U.S. institutions are integrated with cinema/media studies programs.

- In a similar vein, a generational divide on attitudes towards cultural property seems likely to affect both archival and academic practice. Until we see more, it is difficult to predict whether today's "copyright wars" will escalate or subside, and whether copyright proprietors will respond with increased openness or institute increasingly Draconian measures for the protection of cultural property. It is clear, however, that the presence of tens of millions of digitally literate younger people has already caused records custodians to begin to rethink access and copyright.

The twenty-first century archive faces the necessity of reinventing itself without pandering to the fashions of the moment. It must accept the existence of diverse archival models and practices that may extend or rebuke legacy practices. It must critically and tactically embrace emerging technologies that can be both friend and enemy and will likely continue to be disruptive. It must assert its right to offer a broad spectrum of access to its holdings and fight for that right where inhibiting laws and conditions prevail. It must seek validation by creating abundance rather than maintaining scarcity. It must accept that archival ethics generally favor use over the fear of abuse. Above all, it needs to recognize that it is a cultural producer playing a primary role in the dissemination and exchange of images and sounds, not simply a wholesale repository relying on presenters, producers, and scholars to expose its treasures. Absent an aggressive and enthusiastic populism, the archives risk irrelevancy and increased marginalization.

Regional Moving Image Archives in the United States



by Karan Sheldon

Incunabula. An avalanche of junk. In the early 1980s, alphas in the film archives world described film from out-of-the-way places using terms that vibrated between misty yearning and insulting. For many in charge, unpreserved nontheatrical film "out there" was intriguing—but unfamiliar and probably ugly. I believe there has been a shift in how regional custodians view the value of their work; however, many regional archives are not yet seeing a stampede of traffic. Substantial scholarly use of regional collections is just beginning.