

HOW VISIBLE WILL OUR HISTORY BE?

JULIA KNIGHT
University of Sunderland
Sunderland, UK

Abstract. This paper explores some of the factors that determine what cultural material becomes available and visible on the internet via the example of moving image culture. It does this in two ways. Firstly it offers an overview of the shift from analogue to digital moving image distribution. This is based on an AHRC funded historical research project which examined artists and independent moving image distributors in the UK. All distributors studied were non-commercial and committed to expanding the diversity of moving image culture. The aim of the research project was to explore both the constraints they operated under and the strategies they developed for building audiences for the work they distributed. An unanticipated outcome of the research was the identification of many parallels with emerging online distribution practices – contrary to claims for a digital distribution revolution, many of the promotional strategies are very similar to those employed in the analogue era and equally need resourcing. At the same time, the rapidly developing abundance of online resources, artifacts, collections and information has led to the internet being compared to a massive archive. Drawing on the experience of setting up an online Film and Video Distribution Database, the paper goes on to examine how whatever is made available online is only ever a selection from what is available offline. It discusses the factors that impact and shape that process of selection, including selection criteria, digital rights management issues, the time consuming nature of digital resource creation, and resourcing levels. Finally the paper concludes by examining the problem of ensuring the sustainability of online resources once they have been created.

1. Introduction

In recent years there have been frequent references to the impact digitisation has had on preserving our history and cultural artefacts. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (2009, back cover) have, for instance, observed that YouTube in particular ‘has rapidly developed into the world’s largest archive of moving images.’¹ In their 2011–15 Delivery Plan, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC, 2011, p.11) in the UK makes reference to ‘the potential for an “infinite” archive’. Such observations suggest that we now have the ability to preserve all aspects of our culture and history

¹ The book also includes a section on ‘Storage’ in which contributors discuss various ways in which YouTube can be viewed as a form of archive.

for immediate reference by ourselves and for future generations. Staying with the example of moving image, the internet now provides a superabundance of film and video material uploaded by distributors, broadcasters, archives, museums, galleries, artists, political activists, DIY practitioners and hobbyists. Furthermore, as each generation becomes more media and computer literate, and as search engines become ever more sophisticated, digital technology can appear to democratize our access to information. Yet, such assumptions are fundamentally flawed for a number of reasons, which this paper seeks to highlight. The insights offered here are based on my experience of undertaking two related AHRC funded moving image research projects. The first was a study of the distribution activities of a number of UK distributors who specialised in distributing artists' and independent moving image work from the 1970s through to the end of the 1990s. These included the London Film-Makers' Co-op, The Other Cinema, London Video Access, Cinema of Women, Circles, the Film and Video Umbrella, Cinenova and Lux² The second was an e-resource creation project undertaken in collaboration with the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection, which produced the Film and Video Distribution Database (<http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/>). The Film and Video Distribution Database is an online resource which makes freely available a selection of documents – including committee meeting minutes, proposals, reports, correspondence, budgets and funding applications – from the organizations examined in the first project in order to help researchers understand the institutional context that facilitated the circulation of experimental and independent moving image work in the UK and to promote further research.

2. The Shift from Analogue to Digital Distribution

The first project was initiated in the early 2000s and undertaking that research at a time when the YouTube and social media 'revolutions' were on the horizon forced me to question the relevance of trying to better understand historical activity if everything was about to change. While much of the initial hype around digital technology was about cheap production equipment, in 2005–06 it suddenly shifted to talk of a 'distribution revolution', viral marketing and Chris Anderson's (2006) analysis of the internet as a form of 'long tailed distribution'. In short, digital distribution had suddenly become a hot topic, and speculation about its future potential was rife.

However, it quickly became evident that the historical research could help us better understand contemporary activity. Indeed, much of the discussion around digital distribution directly reiterated the interests and aims of the organisations we were studying – a concern with finding alternative means of reaching audiences, expanding audiences for non-mainstream work, and maximising the potential offered by new

² The research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under the titles 'Independent Film and Video Distribution in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s' (2002–04) and 'The Contemporary Promotion of Artists' Film and Video in the UK' (2004–05). See <http://alt-fv-distribution.net/> (information website), as well as the recently published book *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Intellect, 2011), co-authored by Julia Knight and Peter Thomas.

media technologies. Over the last 5–6 years, I have been struck by the frequent reporting of distribution practices and promotional activities now being developed online by young DIY practitioners, activists and entrepreneurs that are very similar to those developed in the analogue era. Just as the London Film-Makers' Co-op and London Video Access were set up by the film/videomakers themselves in the 1960s and 1970s, circumventing existing distributors and returning as much distribution income as possible to makers, online distributors such as OnlineFilm.org (set up in 2000) and VoDo (launched in 2009) have been informed by very similar motives. And just as the history of the independent sector is littered with publishing initiatives – such as *Cinim*, *Afterimage*, *Undercut* and *Independent Video* – to help promote the visibility of its work, online distributors Reframe and MUBI (both launched in 2008) have set up discussion forums to help promote the work they distribute.

More recently, other issues have also begun to emerge which suggest further parallels with past distribution and promotional activity. While the internet has certainly increased the speed and scope of distribution activities, they nevertheless remain highly time-consuming ones and as before, they still need supporting through external funding, earned income or volunteer labour. Indeed, speculation around the apparent potential of digital distribution shifted relatively quickly in most sectors to serious questions about how to monetise the activity. Partly because of this, and partly due to the superabundance of moving image material now available, 'attention grabbing' – attracting users and consumers to your material – has become *more* rather than less crucial. However, since resources are always finite even when operating via the internet, this limits the range of material that can be actively marketed to a target audience and suggests that the internet replicates the uneven economic relations that exist offline. Indeed, although Chris Anderson (2009: 254) discovered that however far you go down the long tail of the internet products continue to sell, it is in very small numbers and thus does not necessarily provide a commercially viable distribution model for small-scale or specialist producers.

It's also easy to forget that not all moving image material has been digitised. As users increasingly shift to consuming moving image work via digital platforms – with, for instance, BBC iPlayer available via the Wii platform and MUBI via PlayStation 3, together with mobile platforms such as the iPod Touch – despite the above-mentioned abundance, the diversity of our moving image culture also narrows as some work becomes far less accessible. This happens whenever a new media format emerges – the massive take off of VHS in the 1980s eclipsed some distributors' catalogues of 16mm films because many of the films were never transferred to video. It is being repeated now as DVD supplants video.

Thus, while far more cultural material and information is indeed more easily accessible via the internet to a greater number of people across the world, it nevertheless remains a *selection* from what is available offline. The range of factors that impact and shape that selection were made very visible during the course of managing my second project, the online Film and Video Distribution Database (FVDD).

3. Some Factors Impacting Online Availability

Firstly, the selection is determined by the interests of those uploading the material. In the case of the FVDD, for instance, our interests were centred on how experimental and independent work was distributed and promoted by UK organisations and how audiences were created for it. But several of the distributors we studied, such as the London Film-Makers' Co-op and London Video Access, also engaged in production and training. Because of our particular interests, documents relating specifically to those activities were excluded from our selection and thus the FVDD offers only a partial history of those organisations. Our choices were very specific to the purpose of the FVDD, but this basic issue of selection from pre-existing offline material is one that besets most online resource creation projects. Some projects are set up to digitize pre-existing collections and thus at one level the process of selection has already been undertaken. This is the case with the Arts On Film Archive (<http://artsonfilm.wmin.ac.uk/>) which provides online streaming of all 450 films made by the film department of the Arts Council England between 1953 and 1998. Yet, even in this case, a decision has been taken by both the project team and the funder – which was again the Arts and Humanities Research Council – that *this* particular collection should be made available to a wider audience via a digitisation project. However, in many instances, resource creators are faced with making a selection from a more extensive collection or range of material, and most set up an advisory board to help make those decisions. But inevitably opinions differ, and those that win out help shape any history that can be constructed using the resulting online resources.

However, the choice of what to include in an online resource is further limited by what rights the creators of online resources can obtain. In the case of the FVDD, several of the organisations we studied no longer existed – such as the London Film-Makers' Co-op (LFMC) and Circles. Thus a first hurdle was establishing who owned the rights to the surviving material. In some cases the documents had been inherited by successor organisations. But for those successor organisations to be able to grant us online publication rights, we had to first establish that a formal transfer of assets had taken place. In other cases, there were no successor organisations and access to the documents had been facilitated through personal contacts. Thus we also had to develop a policy to deal with the eventuality of being unable to identify or locate a rights holder.

This process of digital rights management (DRM) also covers the extent of public access to the electronic artefact(s). Some material may be out of copyright and can be made freely available, while we were fortunate in that our rights holders were supportive of our aims and the FVDD is likewise freely available. But rights holders' willingness to grant online publication can vary enormously. This means that in some cases, some work or artefacts – even when digitised – can still only be accessed offline or can only be sampled online via taster clips or restricted access. The Arts on Film Archive is one example of the latter. While a database of information about the films is freely available online, the digitised films can only be viewed by users based in UK institutions of further and higher education due to copyright restrictions imposed by the Arts Council England.

Furthermore, creating online resources like the FVDD require careful planning and development which involves not only addressing the processes of selection and digital

rights management, but also the issues of digitizing content, optimizing it for web display, designing and constructing the resource, trialling its functionality, designing the web interface, uploading content, trouble-shooting and user testing. Not only are all these tasks highly labour intensive, but the planning and development stages invariably take longer than anticipated. This is partly due to having to deal with unforeseen eventualities. With the FVDD, a number of problems arose that could not have been anticipated. Firstly, the intention was to employ the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection's existing research administrator to undertake the digital rights management work. However, just as the project was awarded funding, she became unavailable, which meant we had to recruit and train a replacement. Secondly, complications arose with the server hosting arrangements put in place at the start of the project, which necessitated finding an alternative. In the process we also lost the provision made for constructing the FVDD's user interface and had to outsource that work elsewhere. And thirdly, the freelance software consultant we had employed unfortunately became ill during the course of the project and was unable to complete the necessary work within the original timescale. These combined factors contributed to significant delays, and what had been planned as a two year project became a three year project. With no access to additional funding, this meant that less content than originally planned could be uploaded to the database prior to its public launch and reduced its potential historical scope.

An obvious solution to these kinds of problems might seem to be to budget for longer planning and development stages. But the single largest cost in these kinds of projects is usually salaries, making them expensive projects to fund. Any lengthening of a project's duration can significantly increase the already high costs. Since all funders look at value for money, increasing the costs can also reduce the chances of being funded in the first place. These issues can make unfunded online resources produced by DIY activist volunteer labour an attractive alternative. However, such projects are dependent on the availability of that volunteer labour which can be highly unpredictable and variable in terms of commitment. With no access to funding, such projects – as is the case with any volunteer sustained cultural initiative – can also be limited in terms of their capacity to grow or develop.

The need for access to resources also raises the issue of how to ensure the sustainability of online initiatives. While e-resources like FVDD and Arts on Film which offer collections of historical material will not really date in terms of their content, others – like the Internet Movie Database – will need constant updating if they are to remain 'fit for purpose'. Some resources can generate income through an advertising or subscription model and become self-sustaining, but many others – such as the FVDD – which have been conceived as specialised research resources and have much smaller user bases cannot. In some cases hosting institutions are willing to bear the financial burden of maintaining and developing a resource's content, but others have to rely on recruiting volunteer labour, which can make the process of updating content very random. However, it is not just a question of content. Online resources date at a technological level as well, and this can also make them less 'fit for purpose' since they no longer provide what users have come to expect of digital resources.

4. Implications for the Future of Digitisation Projects

Thus, while the internet may appear to present a huge, global archive, what is available online is *still* selective and its availability is constrained in a number of ways. Most e-resource creation projects are undertaken in order to make more available material that would otherwise be relatively inaccessible. Indeed, the AHRC's original funding of projects like the FVDD was designed precisely to 'enhance access to and the availability of research materials and resources' (Arts and Humanities Research Board, 2004, p.3). But that emphasis on availability and accessibility functions to conceal the process of selection. In order to better understand the limitations of online resources and collections, it may be useful to think about some internet content in terms archival documentation strategies. Archivists have been grappling with the issue of selection – what to make available – for years. As early as 1986, Helen Samuels argued that in a modern and information-rich society, only a small portion of the vast documentation produced by institutions and cultural activities can be kept. This has meant that archivists now have to take a far more active role in selecting what to keep and she advanced the idea of 'documentation strategies' as a means of doing that.³ In particular, such strategies are initiated to remedy the poor documentation for specific sectors of society, as well as for ongoing issues, activities, or geographic areas. Rather than the traditional archival practice of appraising and managing existing collections, a documentation strategy involves choosing and defining the topic to be documented, as well as selecting the documentation to be included.⁴ Although not necessarily conceived as such, many online resources – like the FVDD and the Arts on Film Archive – can be viewed as documentation strategies, since they improve the documentation of marginalised areas of cultural activity. It is possible to argue that this approach may be more productive in helping us develop our understanding of the shift from analogue to digital distribution than viewing such online resources simply as part of a culture of super-abundance facilitated by the internet.

However, there are also key differences between archiving practices and making material available on the internet. The central purpose of a traditional archive is to preserve the documents and artefacts in its care, and this is done by restricting public access. Thus, while archives preserve particular aspects of our past, they also control who has access to and can learn from those histories. The internet, in and of itself, does not guarantee the preservation of the work it makes available, but can make far more material (and histories) available to many more people – indeed, in contrast to traditional archives, the effectiveness of a website or web-based resource is to a large extent judged on how well used it is.

³ Her ideas about documentation strategies were formed while working with Larry Hackman and were subsequently developed and clarified through a number of publications. See, for instance, Hackman and Warnow-Blewett (1987), Alexander and Samuels (1987), Cox (1989), and Samuels (1991-92).

⁴ Two further activities are also involved: selecting advisors and establishing the site for the strategy; and structuring the inquiry and examining the form and substance of the available documentation. See Samuels (1986, p.116).

Preservation of digital and digitised material has become an issue of increasing concern in recent years. Whereas many digitisation projects have been initiated over the past decade or so – including the FVDD – in order to preserve fragile or dispersed paper records and cultural artefacts, it has become very evident that digital files can be highly unstable, resulting in the loss of data and artefacts.⁵ Indeed, film archivists now readily acknowledge that 35mm film is a far more stable and longer lasting preservation medium for moving image work than any digital format. The only way to ensure the long term availability of digitized material is to migrate it to new formats as they emerge, something which is frequently beyond the means of small-scale resources like the FVDD.

Nevertheless, few would dispute the benefits of the increased availability of documentation and cultural artefacts via the internet. Yet, due to the technological issues noted above, the existence of some online resources could also be very transitory. A key factor in ensuring their continued existence is building usage. The more a website is visited by users, the more visible it becomes, creating a community of interest. This can in turn help secure the continued availability of an online resource or collection, by making it an asset of value to the hosting institution or by building up a user base of volunteer activism to support it. Ironically, in contrast to traditional archives, online collections or ‘archives’ of materials have to ensure that they are used as widely as possible in order to secure their own long-term survival.

While social networking tools have proved very useful in building audiences and user bases for cultural work and activities, it does not necessarily create an even playing field. The REWIND project (<http://www.rewind.ac.uk/>), which was set up to preserve early British video art through an offline digitisation project and to provide an online information database, has reported that their website user stats peak when there is a related real world event being staged. This suggests offline visibility still plays a crucial role in building usage.⁶ Major organisations, such as the BBC or the British Film Institute in the UK, already have extensive real world visibility and hence far greater potential for attracting media coverage in addition to online word of mouth. This in turn means that they are usually able to build far larger user bases for their online resources than can be achieved by specialist online resources like the FVDD.

More worryingly perhaps, the very act of building usage for the growing number of online resources and collections tends to condition users to look only online, which can in turn marginalise the material and information that remains offline (Horak, 2007; Prelinger, 2009). If we are to preserve our history and culture for future generations, it will be necessary not only to safeguard existing online resources (and of course develop new ones), but also to actively promote those that (may always) remain offline.

⁵ The best known example of this is probably the loss of some of the original animation files for Pixar’s *Toy Story* (1995), which was only discovered when the film was to be re-released on DVD.

⁶ Adam Lockhart, REWIND archivist, email correspondence with the author, 24 March 2011.

References

- Alexander, P. N. & Samuels, H. W. (1987). The Roots of 128: A Hypothetical Documentation Strategy. *American Archivist*, 50 (Fall), 518–531.
- Anderson, C. (2006). *The Long Tail: How Endless Choice is Creating Unlimited Demand*. London: Random House.
- Anderson, C. (2009). *The Longer Long Tail: How Endless Choice is Creating Unlimited Demand*. London: Random House.
- Arts and Humanities Research Board, Details of the Resource Enhancement Scheme, September 2004.
- Arts and Humanities Research Council (2011). *Delivery Plan 2011–2015*. Available at <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/About/Policy/Documents/DeliveryPlan2011.pdf> (accessed 1 February 2012).
- Cox, R. J. (1989). A Documentation Strategy Case Study: Western New York. *American Archivist*, 52 (Spring), 192–200.
- Hackman, L. J. & Warnow-Blewett, J. (1987). The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study. *American Archivist*, 50 (Winter), 12–47.
- Horak, J.-C. (2007). The Gap Between 1 and 0: Digital Video and the Omissions of Film History. *Spectator*, 27(1), 29–41.
- Prelinger, R. (2009). The Appearance of Archives. In P. Snickars, P. and P. Vonderau (Eds), *The YouTube Reader* (pp. 268–274). Stockholm: National Library of Sweden.
- Samuels, H. W. (1986). Who Controls the Past? *American Archivist* 49(2), 109–124.
- Samuels, H. W. (1991–92). Improving Our Disposition: Documentation Strategy. *Archivaria*, 33 (Winter), 125–140.
- Snickars, P. & Vonderau, P. (Eds) (2009). *The YouTube Reader*. Stockholm: National Library of Sweden.