

Managing the public archive in the digital framework

I'm James Patterson, Director of the Media Archive for Central England, the public regional moving image archive for the East and west Midlands here in England. I've been doing this for just 10 years now having spent nearly 21 years at the National Film Archive NFTVA at the BFI before then.

I'm jolly pleased to have been asked to talk this morning because I have been thinking for some time now about what we do, what we have traditionally done, and how we should develop these things as the world around us changes.

I want to share some of those thoughts with you this morning.

You will be pleased to know that I don't intend to talk for an hour...but that I propose to leave about 15 minutes at the end for questions and discussion.

I had considered showing some material to you – but in the end, in the context of what I want to say that would just come across as padding.

MACE is currently based at the University of Leicester and, as part of the arrangements, I currently teach an optional undergraduate module which looks at issues around moving image archiving.

I was teaching a class on Monday last looking at the techniques and practices employed in the conservation of film materials and as part of that class I showed an extract from a film made by the NFTVA for use in the FIAF summer schools in the 1990s. It's called "The Work of a Film Archive" and I was struck by how, less than 15 years on, it already looks a bit like ancient history.

Two quotes from the commentary written by my former colleague, Clyde Jeavons, stuck in my mind. One is that "most of the problems of film archives stem from the fact that almost all cinema film was made on nitrate cellulose until 1951". The other was that "some (note

Managing the public archive in the digital framework

some) film archives are even (note even) collecting television these days”....cut to the gentle windmill-like turning of the spools on a series of 1” machines busily recording off air.

Nowhere in this film is any mention of digital technology...

A first generation BFI computer with the technical records and an electronic grading machine are the closest we get.

Leaving aside the fact that this was a film made about practices at a major national archive of cinema and how different that is to the work of many other types of moving image archive, the film illustrates just how far things have moved since then...just 15 years ago...

Now I’m not for one minute suggesting that the approaches taken to film archiving by the NFTVA at the time were wrong or misguided. On the contrary, these techniques were as advanced as any in the world at the time – and how strange would it be for me to run down the work of an organisation of which I was one of the senior staff at the time!

No, I mention this just to illustrate how far the world has changed.

15 years ago we were living in a largely analogue world. PCs were far from ubiquitous. Those who surfed the net were a rare breed indeed.

Technologies have moved on apace and now we exist in a digital world (or at least we live in a world where digital technologies have hugely impacted our professional practice as moving image archivists.

It might be good to remind ourselves what we do.

As the public moving image archive sector, collectively we are widely acknowledged to carry the responsibility for the selection and acquisition, research, documentation and cataloguing, preservation and conservation and accessibility of our “screen heritage”.

Managing the public archive in the digital framework

Over the past 75 years we have developed ways of doing this work. We have developed organisations, techniques and practices which have responded to the needs of the materials we collect and the audiences we collect them for. We have developed and shared principles and ethics to govern what we do.

What I want to consider this morning is....

Do all these things still hold good in the brave new world? Or have things actually changed to a point where we need to undertake a complete rethink?

I'll come back to this anon but...

Let's start by considering the implications of Digital. What are we talking about? It's a word much overused by lots of people who have only a partial grasp of it. And often it seems as if they only think of it in terms of some magic new way of preserving analogue materials – and saving storage space and making everything we do cheaper....!

For the purposes of this piece today I want to look at 4 things.

- I want to look at how digital impacts on our preservation practices
- And I want to look at how the digital world impacts on our access activities.
- And that means that we have to consider
- the issues of digital copies of analogue material
and
- the issues of born digital material

There is not any area of our work that is not impacted one way or another by “the digital world”.

In some ways material which is created now in this new world and which has never been analogue presents the least complicated challenge – at least philosophically.

If it's born digital, it is designed to exist in that way and to be seen in that way (those ways perhaps). The ethical considerations I will touch on shortly don't impact here. Our established guidance about preserving in the medium of production is not challenged by this new technology.

No, the issue for us is one of selection and acquisition. While there will be many forms of and approaches to digital production that are familiar to us from the analogue era – feature films, documentaries, training and industrial films and family records for example – there are new forms which are developing which require us to think carefully through our selection processes. The kind of personal Vlogging (video blogging I assume) activity which is now common on the web is, it seems to me, a form of moving image we cannot ignore but yet it sits outside our established selection procedures – how do we determine if a given vlog is interesting or important and how do we determine notions of regionalism for example when things are posted globally and come from somewhere which has no sense of place. Likewise how do we select from the kind of ephemeral moving image material shot on phones or created using ubiquitous software in thousands of homes. How are we going to see it to select from?

This material presents a selection challenge to us.

But equally challenging to us in the public film archive sector is how to secure these materials if we do select them. The traditional collection techniques, which in my 30 years experience rely on physical materials being offered to us when they cease to have a useful existence in their current location – be that cupboard, garage, loft, museum, archive, business or film laboratory etc - , can certainly not be relied on when it exists in disposable materials like discs or in the hard drives of pcs and Macs.

This may not be such a change for the long term relationships between archives and commercial producers.

But if home **videotape** presents an acquisition challenge – and it does – then how much more will we need to adapt our approaches to meet the challenge of collecting this born digital material.

We need to develop technological techniques for capturing this material; we need to develop ways of obtaining permission to acquire and to use, we need to develop information streams so we know what there is and so that the progenitors of the material understand that what they have has a cultural (if not a financial) capital and could be important in how we understand the world today. And we need to develop the staff that understand and connect with this stuff and, realistically, most of us in the public archive sector are a bit long in the tooth!

I want to look now at the impact of the digital world on the preservation of our analogue holdings.

There has been a certain amount written about the relationship and it is an area where there are probably as many shades of opinion as there are archivists to hold them.

For me it helps to separate out the difference between preservation, conservation and restoration.

At its most simple level, the preservation of analogue material can be achieved by using digital surrogates to protect it whilst ensuring that the environmental conditions (by which I mean the containers and how things are stored in them as well as temperature and humidity) are the best achievable for the “originals”. This way preservation is carried out in the medium of production (assuming that the copy being preserved is in that medium) and the ethics of preservation are not challenged. (I’ll come to presentation shortly).

Ethical considerations come into play when digital techniques are employed in the more interventionist requirements of conservation or restoration.

Managing the public archive in the digital framework

Digital restoration techniques have been around for many years and become more sophisticated as time goes on. Whether these are in the area of colour correction or the replacement of colour in faded copies, or in the digital enhancement of sound or the restoration of lost picture through decay etc., archivists have been considering the implications for many years and I do not intend to get sidetracked into an ethical debate here. The techniques exist and we have to manage our archives according to our own guidelines and make decisions in the context of that. Suffice it to say that I am far from convinced that one ethical size fits all here. An approach that is ethically inappropriate for a feature film in a national collection may be perfectly acceptable for a 9.5mm home movie in a local or regional context.

The digital world we occupy requires us to look again at the principle which states that we should preserve in the medium of production. No-one is seriously going to suggest that we always do this. Indeed the copying of 2" broadcast tape to Digi Beta for preservation already sets a precedent.

The use of digital techniques in preservation requires that we do nothing to endanger the long term availability of an appropriate surrogate.

Whichever way we go into the future one thing I am sure of. It is the responsibility of the public archive sector not only to preserve material but to preserve the ability for people to experience that material in the way it would have been experienced.

I don't mean every title here. And I don't mean trying to recreate the fleapit atmosphere of a local cinema on a wet Tuesday evening in February 1950 where one would see the film from an uncomfortable seat, through a fog of cigarette smoke, accompanied by the smell of wet gabardine and fish and chips!

No...

What I mean is that we have a responsibility, whatever happens, to ensure that future generations can see projected film; can understand the nature of the industrial process that

produced it or the nature of the camera that great great grandfather shot his home movies on. The experience of the collective viewing on a big screen of a projected picture whether this is in the cinema or re-creating the domestic experience of setting up the screen the projector and the sense of occasion that that engendered is fundamental to the understanding of the product, why it looks the way it does, what limitations were imposed on the film maker. Without that almost museum approach alongside the work we do with the material itself I think we will have failed in a major way to carry out our responsibilities.

These ideas are debated by Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath and Michael Leobenstein in *Film Curatorship – Archives, Museums and the Digital Marketplace*. And if you have not read it can I commend it to you as a most interesting and valuable debate and one which I would really welcome being taken much further and wider than this group and this book. There are many film archive contexts in which the ideas can be discussed and where, I believe, we would find different emphases and conclusions.

And this brings me to presentation and the impact of the digital world on how we see and consume the materials we collect and preserve. And here, in many ways, is the greatest impact.

Just before I start on the consumption of the images themselves we should note the impact that the digital world is beginning to have in the information about film and the way it is understood. Interactive catalogues - a wiki approach to the building up of information, the development of folksonomies and the invitation to the world to arrange information, to tag material and represent things are maybe in their infancy yet in the public archive sector but there is a seemingly irrepressible drive towards this kind of interactive approach. We need to address these issues and consider how they sit with our role as formal arrangers and presenters of information.

But back to the material...

Managing the public archive in the digital framework

I have already invoked the archival ethic of preserving in the medium of production. I have also made the case for the archive's responsibility to preserve the original experience of consumption. Our role is ultimately about the past, about our understanding of the past – whether that's from the standpoint of understanding the past of the art of the film or understanding the past through the medium of film.

For there to be any value in the work that we do it seems to me that we have to use all the tools that we can muster to deliver that understanding.

Film –the stuff itself - has its passionate followers. Film archives and institutions contain these passions as much as any avid private collector of celluloid. A former colleague at the BFI proudly wore a badge which read “better dead than video”. I'm sure that person would feel the same about digital.

But digital is a welcome enabler – not the devil incarnate or the harbinger of death to the work we do. In presentation terms it is the vehicle we are principally riding at the moment. It was film once, then it was tape, it has been and it continues to be TV (and that's largely digital now) it is discs of various kinds and it's the internet and streaming or downloadable files....and it will be many more things before my time is up I'm sure.

Digital technologies allow us to get images to audiences in ways and places and more economically than we have ever managed before.

And we need to consider audiences in all of this. We need to put ourselves in their place and balance what they might think important with what we might think is important.

So for a village hall audience 60 miles from the nearest cinema in Marches of Herefordshire how important is the medium of film in their ability to see moving images. Do they mind that the presentation is on projected DVD rather than on film? Actually in that context they would only have seen 16mm film which is not the original medium anyway...

Managing the public archive in the digital framework

For an audience that these days is used to watching films on the small screen as TV presentations or as DVD presentations, the large screen experience even from DVD is just another way of seeing the product. And often the community experience whether the shared experience of a cinema or a village gathering is as important as the film itself.

We have a responsibility to be alive to the context of the screening beyond any purist instincts that we may have.

But I think that the internet and its influence is driving other more urgent considerations for us.

The explosion of the on-line availability of information has had, is having and will continue to have a fundamental impact on our work.

Pressure is building behind the idea (erroneous at least in legal terms but compelling nonetheless) of a right to access. Right or wrong though the notion of a right to access may be it now carries so much weight that it is pretty much irrepressible. And our response to this is to make material available on line.

But in doing this we are faced with many choices. Access in the good old days was about screening prints, selling clips and research study on a Steenbeck machine.

Now we are faced with the challenge of developing new ways of making the material accessible to new audiences.

But there are many options when we begin to look at the approach, or rather the approaches, we might take.

And indeed there are many constraints, economic not the least, which need to be considered even if the barriers of copyright are overcome. And again the approach taken by one archive might not be appropriate to the approach taken by another.

Managing the public archive in the digital framework

A collection which has a predominance of completed formal and released films and an interest in the art of the film like the BFI might and probably should take a different approach to their availability on the web to a collection whose material is more fragmentary and whose drivers are around an deeper understanding of people and place.

So there will be issues around whether one offers whole films or extracts, whether these are presented alone or in a relationship with the catalogue or in a highly contextualised setting.

There will be issues around the releasing of material for use on other platforms like YouTube and how they might be presented in that setting.

For example we are challenged with making archive film of interest to younger audiences to let them mash it up – to make something of it that it was never intended to be because in its original state they will not be interested.

And once material is released into the global atmosphere of the web can we control what people do with them anyway...and actually should that be our fundamental concern. Should we not be pleased to find there are proliferating opportunities and settings in which the material can be seen.

A couple of years ago I confess to having a moment of anxiety to discover footage from MACE's web pages appearing to have been linked into a site called **Birmingham Isn't Shit**. But these kinds of linkage happen all the time and we are not always aware.

Recently one of our more light hearted regional news stories recreating the exploits of Victorian Black Country hero Jumping Joe Darby – champion of the standing jump – had an intrepid reporter failing to cross part of the Birmingham canals in a single bound and getting very wet in the process. The level of blogging activity following its linkage to a canal blogger's site was startling to witness as was the trouble that some enthusiasts went to identify the location in which it was filmed in 1972. After three days one blogger definitively produced a set of contemporary photographs alongside frame captures to show he had identified it.

Leaving aside the copyright implications of this not because they are not crucially important but because we all understand that these rights exist and to do any of this work we need permissions – the question is should we be going down this new road/ Is it right for the public archive to be embracing this stuff? And celebrating this kind of activity around the use of archive film.

Is it unethical? Is it even our responsibility?

Well I've raised a lot of questions and I think it's time to hold my hand up and offer my response.

As I said earlier, I think that there are many possible responses. I don't think that there is a right or a wrong set of answers to these things any more than I think that any one person can determine definitively whether a film or a collection is significant or not. It depends on the context in which you place things and the perspective from which you approach things.

A national archive will have a different set of drivers and parameters for its work to a regional or local or subject specific archive. They will all have different responses to the question, equally valid in the context of their own organisations and priorities.

We have a clear choice then – to embrace the new technologies or bring the shutter down and concentrate on what we have been doing

For me I think that we have to embrace the new world, we have to rejoice in the opportunity that it brings and we have to meet and overcome the challenge that it presents.

But I am equally certain that we do not do that at the expense of the values, principles and practices developed over the past 75 years.

Practical matters if nothing else should lead us to this position. I believe we will find no political support and therefore no possibility of funds if we don't. And I believe firmly that

Managing the public archive in the digital framework

we need to build new business models to supplement the ever tightening levels of funding to our activity because (let's face it) moving image archiving sits far away from the central areas of public spending.

And part of managing the public moving image archive in this age is going to have to be about income generation - and income generation in such a way and to such a level that it makes a considerable contribution to sustainability in a time of squeezed budgets.

The digital world offers opportunities to build new commercial models to support the archive sector as a whole and the moving image archive sector in particular.

I was very struck by an analogy made by the BBC's Tony Ageh at a conference last November which carried the subtitle "Rethinking archives for the digital age". Like many such conferences it carried the word treasures in its title.

Tony 's these was that far from thinking about archives as places where one might uncover treasure – an occasional gem amongst the useless quartz – he thought about them like a coal mine.

And he drew an analogy with the Duke of Bridgewater who had mines at Worsley near Manchester. In the city there was an industrial revolution waiting to happen and needing the coal to drive it. Bridgewater employed Brindley to build a canal to get the coal to market and the industrial revolution was born.

Ageh sees a new revolution waiting to happen – maybe not one of the scale of the industrial revolution, but a mushrooming of economic creativity driven by the stuff of archives. The digital framework is the canal. We just have to find the mechanism to get the material to the market. We don't have to worry about the nature of the activity when it gets there but we have to find our Brindleys we have to build that bridge. And if we can I genuinely believe we can build a new prosperity for work we do.

Managing the public archive in the digital framework

Heaven knows I'm not arguing for the withdrawal of public funds or the turning of public bodies into commercial libraries. Just for the development of a new business model.

So embracing this world has a pragmatic edge too.

But actually if our role is really about connecting people with the screen heritage and if we are serious about maximising the benefits which can accrue in so many ways from that connection – be they educational benefits, health benefits, economic benefits or just enjoyment plain and simple – then we have to explore what these opportunities might be.

And what does that mean for our management of the public archive in the digital framework?

Well, I would argue that at least in England it means change. The status quo has not the capacity to address these challenges satisfactorily – not the technical or technological capacity – not the staffing capacity – and actually not the level of understanding needed in sufficient depth.

Nor does the sector as a whole have sufficient academic and philosophical underpinning. Only now and in the most limited of ways is research being undertaken into what we do, how we do it and why. We urgently need to see an extension of museum and archive studies, heritage studies, historical studies and film studies to being to address what these changes mean and to help us as archivists to understand the work we do and the processes we perform and the impact they have. We need to know what it means to those who consume, what it means for us and what it means for the stuff itself.

Which brings me back to structures.... The challenge is too great, I believe, too expensive, and too complex to be satisfactorily met by a series of small organisations.

The time has come to look closely again at what we do and to refocus our work on the delivery of benefit from engagement with the resources we are charged with developing

and looking after. At the same time we need to look at how we array the expertise and the facilities we have developed to really make an impact.

The creation of larger core units would allow for the realisation of much needed economies of scale in those areas of work which can be sensibly aggregated.

But the aggregation and increased centralisation of some areas of our work must not – cannot be at the expense of what is best about the current arrangements. The ability to understand the collections and respond to local and regional agendas and priorities, to develop partnerships with individuals and organisations to enrich delivery on the ground is our greatest strength in the regions. So what I would argue for is not the development of a single body to do this work because with a single body would come a singularity of approach and, as I have said throughout the paper, I don't believe one size fits all in this work.

I believe absolutely in the importance of and the need for the maintenance of national, regional and local approaches to selecting, collecting and understanding and engaging with our screen heritage. These roles are not the same, the approaches are not the same, but they are equally valuable and entirely complementary. Without this richness and without the bringing of many perspectives to this extraordinary resource we are doomed to being marginalised. We are not just about a pile of material. We are or should be primarily about how we engage people with it. Without that engagement the pile of stuff has no meaning and we derive no benefit for people from it and if we are not doing that we are lost.

We talked when I joined the NFA in the 1970s we talked of our work being for posterity. That has not changed...it cannot change....what has changed is that posterity has arrived and is here now and in a digital form.

Our challenge in the management of the public archives is to meet head on the opportunity that this digital moment is bringing to us.

The future is bright if we have the courage to embrace the opportunity.