

The future of screen heritage in the UK

The MeCCSA Symposium, September 2007

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Introduction

Following the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review announced in October 2007, the financial problems facing the British Film Institute and moving image archives may have receded a little. The BFI now probably has more time to work on solutions to the big issues that have, so far, been overshadowed by outraged squabbles over what the BFI proposes to cut next. The issues – which can be drawn together under the umbrella question of how we propose to preserve and access our screen heritage in the longer-term – clearly need the framework of a strategic vision that is held in common by all the players in this field, from the BFI to the BBC, the British Library, and sundry smaller others.

The BFI is the lead body in the field of preserving the moving image, but its financial situation is anomalous. Funded partly by the DCMS through the UK Film Council, more than half its income is still raised from private sources such as its membership base. Given that the UK's National Film and TV Archive (NFTVA) is part of the BFI, is it not strange that our greatest national collection of film and TV material depends on private income just to survive? Or that access to related documentation requires a fee? It's like suggesting that the London Library should look after the British Library collections, and charge people to access them.

Financial need has led the BFI to some nimble solutions over the past thirty years, to avoid going under. Its very success has, however, obscured the underlying problem; that there is no over-arching long-term strategy for 'collecting' and holding the visual material being produced in increasing numbers, nor the documentation (like scripts) that goes with it. There is no legal deposit (as with printed material), no right to acquire for the nation on request, no easy access via a union catalogue of holdings, and no way of using 'quotes' or 'fair-dealing copies' from moving images in other moving image productions, without fully clearing rights.

On top of that, the BFI is not the only player in the field. The British Library has just appointed its first Moving Image Curator, and the BBC has begun an ambitious

project to open out its archive to the general public. Many other important collections, large and small, regional and specialist, around the country are anxious to ensure preservation and access for their material. Making sense of this patchwork picture clearly needs strategic planning, negotiation, and a willingness to think outside our current institutional frameworks for the benefit of future users of this material.

The first steps have been taken. The BFI has released a strategic plan from a working party, and consultation has now closed on this first phase.* Secondly the Media Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA), as the subject association representing media studies, has organised a symposium which brought together the whole range of players from the BBC to the National Motor Museum, to discuss strategic issues facing this sector. The intention of the symposium was quite simple – to pool knowledge of what the main players were doing, and to discuss options for the future.

The Symposium

MeCCSA has for some months been concerned about the apparent difficulties being faced by some of the bodies charged with keeping and maintaining collections of media material. What seemed to be lacking was an opportunity for key players and interested parties to debate openly those issues that would form part of a strategy to address – longer-term – the needs of the sector. Doing that would surely help to make sensible judgements in the shorter-term, and to make clearer the reasons for making them.

Organised for MeCCSA by the Universities of Leeds and Roehampton, and held at Roehampton in September 2007, the symposium attracted 61 delegates and speakers from major archival institutions as well as smaller players, and from Higher Education. They included representatives from the Imperial War Museum, the British Screen Advisory Council, Museums Libraries and Archives Council, the BBC Written Archives Centre, the Federation of Commercial and Audiovisual Libraries, the National Motor Museum, Elstree Screen Heritage, the Film Agency for Wales, and the North West Film Archive. Delegates from 16 institutions represented Higher Education across England, Scotland and Wales. Several unaffiliated delegates brought valuable experience to the symposium as former curators and archivists.

Keynote speakers from the BBC, British Film Institute, British Library, British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC), and the Film Archive Forum (representing regional film archives) presented their views of current and future archiving issues facing the moving image sector.

The BBC's Adam Lee described our screen heritage as an under-used resource, and discussed how the BBC is developing their Open Archive as a public resource within a commercial broadcasting environment. As Lee explained the boundaries between a commercial and a public service archive are difficult to understand, and the BBC employs a Public Value Test (PVT) as a way of ensuring they have the right model.

* Kelly, Ruth ed. (2007) *Strategy for UK Screen Heritage*. Prepared by the UK Film Heritage Group for consultation. June 2007. London, BFI. 28pp.

Using the BBC programme catalogue as a central access point, with user recommendations and embedded links as additional assistance, the Corporation has adopted an on-demand strategy.

The BUFVC's director Murray Weston talked of the national picture as a whole and welcomed the UK Film Heritage Group's consultation document as beginning to establish a process, addressing the issues and encouraging debate. There were of course problems and questions, including the use of the word 'heritage' and whether the old enemies access and preservation should be separated. He outlined our problems which include; no statutory deposit, no unified catalogue, poor research access, no inter-library loans system, no arrangements for 'fair-dealing' (yet) and no developed culture of reference or review. In addition, there is rarely any integration of moving image material with textual documentation, and the training for its use is either poor or non-existent. In particular we must explore the needs of our users, address content acquisition and pursue the idea of statutory deposit. Strategy was often short-termist, undermining the attempt to pursue a longer and more sustainable vision. His suggestions for strengthening the strategy were focused around statutory deposit, developing the concept of a distributed national collection, considering public-private partnership formulae, separating preservation from access and generally to articulate a larger vision.

The Director of the British Film Institute Amanda Nevill offered some insights into the reasons why short-term issues often came to the fore. There have been longer term goals set by the BFI as the lead body in this field, but there have also been crises to hit the sector and the institution every 5 to 6 years. The need at present was to stabilise the situation and win hearts and minds, of both the people and the government. The BFI has been active in the campaign to raise the profile of these issues, and has plans for a new Film Centre on the South Bank. Hopefully the National Film Archive, which is akin to a national museum, will benefit from the renewal of the BFI's Royal Charter in a few years time, which may well lift film up the agenda of heritage collections.

The BFI's Ruth Kelly outlined the vision of the UK Film Heritage Group, brought together under the auspices of the BFI to consider a strategy for moving image archives, and whose vision incorporates the public's entitlement to access, learn about and enjoy its rich screen heritage wherever they live and wherever the materials are held. Their consultation document, published in June 2007, refers mainly to phase one of a two-phase vision, covering the next three years. It is aimed at revitalising the regions by ensuring that nominated archives across the country are properly resourced, at least in relation to their current operations, and linked by a new union catalogue of holdings accessible online through a web portal. Secondly, securing the safety of the national collections held by the BFI is expensive but essential, and thirdly developing the digital infrastructure to deliver access to the public via the new network. The BFI had introduced a new collections policy in 2003 but this was now ready for review, which raised questions of full preservation vs. reference to other holdings, of cultural and historical significance, of technical standards and change, of intellectual property and of cost issues in relation to all these. Now is the time, said Ms. Kelly, for there to be one strategy that helped move the situation forward, and a final document on strategy would be available before the end of 2007. Questions remain of course, notably on collecting policy in a digital world and in particular in

relation to TV post the analogue switch-off, and on the relationship between the HE community and collections, archives and audience.

The Chief Executive of the British Library, Lynne Brindley, welcomed the opportunity of engaging with a national debate about these issues. She outlined some of the BL's work in this field, including capturing websites, email and snapshots of weblogs, working together on research projects with the research councils, and Project Gateway, which will provide new kinds of access to the BL's collections. Their work with moving image material had now developed to the point where they had appointed a new Curator, Luke McKernan. The BL catered for a range of readership, with 64.3% drawn from the HE sector, but the intention was general, and still to cater for 'studious and curious people' as envisaged in the original statement of 1753. The consultation document from the UK Film Heritage Group was welcomed along with the opportunity to engage in a national debate. A national strategy should ensure as complete an archive of film as possible, an effective landscape of 'joined-up' provision, effective partnerships and collaborations, access now and for future generations, the advancement of research through a wide range of material formats, and appropriate IP arrangements. Lynne supported the BFI and others in this struggle to preserve and make material accessible, and will take the fight for fair-dealing into the European IP and copyright discussions.

James Patterson, for the regional archives of the Film Archive Forum, was also keen to emphasise partnership, collaboration and the need to consult more widely. Everyone should have access to our screen culture and history, and in particular to repository services, to advice and to information. We need to ensure the collections contain the 'right' material, reflecting the culture of cinema, of the wider culture of moving image and also of the life and experience of the UK 'as seen through the lens'. Copyright, he felt, was less of an issue for regional archives because usually what people donated were what they wanted seen. But it is dangerous relying on donations, perhaps because people did not value videotape or digital material as much as they did film. However increased circulation of current material, via YouTube and others, was beginning to overcome issues of availability. The sector needed to ensure material was also going to be accessible in the future. There are many difficulties and challenges, and we are more likely to overcome these by positioning ourselves as an outward-facing responsive sector, open to ideas and seeking partnerships.

Michael Chanan (Roehampton University) pointed out that the law has always lagged behind creative and scholarly needs, and the law of intellectual property in this field is no exception. He hailed the 2006 Gowers report[†] as a useful step forward, but noted that in the USA the concept of fair-dealing has been coming increasingly under attack, and we should be wary of this. There is a 'huge new electronic commons' happening now anyway via the net and we should remember, when framing strategy, that knowledge is 'non-rivalrous'. IP law should take account of our 'partial public goods'.

John Ellis (Royal Holloway, University of London) talked of 're-purposing' our task in the knowledge economy, of thinking about moving image material and related

[†] Gowers, Andrew (2006) *Gowers Review of Intellectual Property*. London, HMSO for HM Treasury. 150pp.

documentation as 'data', of as much use to medicine or the climate change debate as to social and political questions. Rather than considering the Mitchell and Kenyon material as quaint stories, for example, the value of the data on urban space from within those films is hugely important. Digital technology helps us to make that material accessible, and the provision of metadata in the form of cataloguing and indexing helps us to understand that material. John suggested this changed priorities and raised different questions; from the 'exceptionalism' of the previous collection and access policies towards a discussion of how we might best access the whole range of material available to us, in ways not previously thought of. We are, said John, entering a process akin to a revolution.

Ian Christie (Birkbeck, University of London) talked of the need to set priorities, even if they turn out later to be the wrong ones! Realistically, there was no way the National Film Archive could equate to the British Library: paper libraries do not have to deal with decay to the same extent as film archives, and the costs of statutory film deposit would be vast. Film academics too often ignore issues of restoration and discovery, and are not the archives' biggest customers. We should be talking more broadly with historians and social scientists. The NFA has of course got a rather 'thin' definition of film, with regional film archives actually being better models for the archive of the future, collecting amateur material as well as a wide range of professional material. Indeed, going 'wider' in the definition of screen heritage, artefacts and related ephemera is extremely important, but centres like the National Media Museum and the Bill Douglas Centre at the University of Exeter play too small a part in the field. We also need to be aware that digitisation does NOT mean preservation – recent film processes involve making a digital intermediate copy rather than an internegative, and disappearance of the data on such copies has resulted in serious damage to at least one major film recently (rumoured to be *Panic Room*, 2002). Digital, however, means better access, often to better quality images, and most cinemas are now on the way to becoming digital. It's often a better spectator experience, and it is not necessary to preserve the celluloid viewing experience at all costs. Ian also warned about becoming too narrowly 'national' in our conception of film and media archives. The Joint European Filmography was an attempted union catalogue, and might be revived as a model for pan-European co-operation in archiving and research.

The plenary discussion sessions began in the afternoon. Leo Enticknap (U. of Leeds) was concerned that while the BFI was taking preservation seriously, there were doubts over their ability to do it, following the loss of key staff and expertise in recent years. He emphasised that digital technology was not a preservation medium for film. This point was later developed by the BBC's Adam Lee after the conference, who added that material born and distributed digitally required preservation in that original form. Leo and he agreed that for other AV materials, digital masters are or may be appropriate. This includes analogue video where the pragmatic solution to equipment obsolescence might be to keep a digital surrogate as master.

Sue Maldon (FOCAL) reminded the symposium of the need for adequate training of archivists, and Christine Gledhill (U. of Sunderland) suggested we need to emphasise the value of film not as intrinsic but through critical activity and international enterprise. We need to offer different perspectives of libraries and archives. Clyde Jeavons (formerly Curator of the NFTVA) emphasised the need to raise the status of

film and get the medium recognised as the 7th Art. Clyde referred to the issue of statutory deposit and the report by Sir Anthony Kenny[‡] which, he claimed, could provide benefits at very low cost. Roger Smither (Imperial War Museum) agreed that digital storage did present a problem, that the issues facing the IWM revolved around funds and that too often good access to the material was hindered by the need to generate income. Ralph Montagu (National Motor Museum, Beaulieu) pointed out that specialist archive expertise was available throughout the country but was too often isolated and under-used – a rationalisation was needed.

Amanda Nevill (BFI) reminded the symposium of the political realities of the Comprehensive Spending Review. The notion of statutory deposit was not something that could be considered until the next spending review in 3 years time; currently we were catching up with the issues that required immediate attention.

Amid a general discussion about preservation and statutory deposit, Clyde Jeavons made the point that a statutory deposit system could be selective and that we have an obligation to fund it or at least ring-fence its operation. He further noted that it is unethical to spend public money on restoration of commercial films without getting some form of ownership – effectively we were paying some considerable costs to benefit a private and commercial operation. Charlotte Crofts (U. of the West of England) referred back to the access discussion by reminding the symposium of the new tools now available to us, particularly the Internet Movie Database (imdb).

Richard Paterson's (BFI) concern was to find a common set of approaches within HE, to move ahead on work that benefits the BFI. Given the current set-up of institutions, how can the research councils move forward on projects that benefit all? There is some progress on legal issues, as Gowers has argued for the right to copy and legally this is likely to be possible, but it was important to coordinate politically between HE and the field.

In response, Ian Christie referred to 'dating services' between archives and researchers, involving projects and PhD students as a practical forward step. Charlotte Crofts suggested more public screenings linked with issues of restoration, for example, and Leo Enticknap referred to the need for intermediate training of archivists. Amanda Nevill (BFI) suggested that a twinned funding stream from the DCMS (which has responsibility for funding preservation) and HEFCE would be a useful way of joining up the parts of the sector.

At the end of the day, in summing up the debates John Ellis referred to the effect of digital technologies on archiving. His earlier suggestion of a revolution in access is likely to have far-reaching effects in what kinds of knowledge that can be obtained from moving image and related material, treating this as 'data' for research rather than as objects to be preserved. Conclusions reached during the day were:

1. There's a lot of digitising going on. Everyone at the symposium had heard about something they had not been aware of before. The question is how we can continue to find out about such work.

[‡] Kenny, Anthony (1998) *Report of the Working Party on Legal Deposit*. London, HMSO for DCMS. Available from <http://www.bl.uk/about/policies/workreplegdep.html> [24/10/07]

2. Nobody had dissented from the BFI's Strategy document. Everyone supported it, governed as it was by political reality. It was intended to stabilise the situation, and as such was a basis for moving forward. On how we refer to it, 'heritage' was right for a stabilisation programme; the banner for moving forward is a different matter.
3. There are uncertainties.
 - a. What is the likely demand for archive material? It is difficult to find a business model for this, as we won't know until we have done it.
 - b. Statutory deposit. In the straw poll earlier in the day, everyone voted for it except those who might have to implement it. The priority is to find the long-term funding for it first.
 - c. Selection. How we select depends on understanding what this is all for, i.e. on what basis we believe we are preserving such access.
 - d. Digital is a fresh set of problems. We don't even know the dimensions of these problems yet, because technology is still being developed – indeed technology is *always* under development. What is clear is that digital may be an answer to access problems, but it is not an answer to preservation.
 - e. Organisationally, there are likely to be difficulties with a central organisation coupled with dispersal via a network of other players. There are a large number of players of different sizes in this field. They might be collaborators but they are also competitors. What is clearly needed here is a strong forum, preferably run by honest brokers. The suggestion here is that academics tend to be useful brokers, as they have neither money nor a competitive role!
4. The role of HE in the future of moving image archives is still up for discussion. Academics in general have not so far really valued the range of this material, especially in seeing it as data in research or teaching. Science, medical, and historical faculties need to consider such material as valuable to them, not just as media texts; and the use to all academia is a pre-requisite for any successful lobbying of HEFCE and other such funders. It is important to ensure that such archives are indeed used widely, and this is the job of the BUFVC.
5. There is, as a result of today, a mandate from the attendees – a desire from both sides to make the strategy work. The moment for moving ahead has come; it fulfils governmental agendas, it fits into cooperation with industry and with greater demand and facilities for dissemination. This will lead to more people using such archives and libraries, and in turn to a greater need for training in the skills needed to make archives and libraries work (as has already been called for).
6. So, cooperation is the immediate necessity if we are all to be true partners in the knowledge economy.

Final notes from the delegates included a reminder that the 27th October is UNESCO's World AV Archives Day, and that fair-dealing is a major topic of the FIAF Congress in Paris. The University of Sunderland is holding a conference on the 'histories of the moving image' on 16th to 18th November, and the Imperial War Museum runs an annual Festival/competition for student films. The Louis Le Prince Centre at the University of Leeds' Institute of Communication Studies is planning a one-day conference on Moving Image archives and the HE sector, around Easter 2008. Finally, the UK Screen Heritage Network is a group of museums, archives, media producers, broadcasters and academic institutions brought together under the auspices of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council to advance the concept of screen heritage and encourage its preservation and promote wider access. Their first project is one to identify collections of moving and screen-related objects, and the lead partners in this project are the National Media Museum, BUFVC and Screen Archive South East. The project head is Michael Harvey at the NMM (michael.harvey@nationalmediamuseum.org.uk).

There seemed to be general acceptance that the day was positive and useful, and could prove important in bringing the field together to negotiate a unified strategy, and to make it work. Given the range of attendees, and their importance to the field, it seems (as John Ellis pointed out) a good time to create or adapt a mechanism to keep up the good work. With everybody talking, sharing their understanding of the sometimes considerable problems facing the preservation and accessibility of this type of material, we now need to agree how we continue the discussion. MeCCSA will continue to offer its services, if necessary, as facilitator.

The symposium was organised for MeCCSA by Dr. Ian W. Macdonald, Research Director of the Louis Le Prince Centre, Institute of Communication Studies, University of Leeds; and Michael Chanan, Professor of Film and Video Studies, School of Arts (Film and Video), Roehampton University. We are extremely grateful to the symposium Steering Group and for the assistance at Roehampton of Dr. Anita Biressi, Blanca Sainz-Garcia and Billie Dokur, and to our key speakers. Many thanks to all!