

# What Do We Profess To?

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The answer to Edmondson's question, raised more than two decades ago, is an unequivocal 'yes,' especially after considering his definitions and qualification measures. The politics of professional identity is built not only on a shared and defined knowledge base. As Edmondson points out in his reflection, it is also a question of self-identification, by those working in the field, and external recognition, from their stakeholders. This idea of inclusivity and exclusivity initially helped address an early anxiety within the profession, which stemmed from its relationship to a prior form of the profession. This may end up being an unproductive exercise in the face of developments within and beyond the field. Such a process blurs the disciplines' theoretical underpinnings and the immediacy of socio-cultural contexts in which they operate. Where does the profession go after laying claim to its identity?

I belong to a generation of audiovisual archivists emerging out of formal university programs. Trained to become professionals, we ticked every box Edmondson laid out on his checklist. We grasped distinct terminologies and perfected relevant practices while adhering to the profession's philosophies and principles. Early on, we were exposed to and consequently engaged with the AV archiving community through our projects, internships, and participation in fora and associations. While most of these standards are moving targets and some of these values have yet to be agreed on and codified,

there is a semblance of a shared educational experience and common professional training which strengthens one's self-identification as an audiovisual archivist, as Edmondson argues. This serves as a formal transference of sorts: encouraging inclusivity, as students feel a sense of belonging to a community, and strengthening their professional identity, while also tracing their lineage to the likes of Henry Langlois and Iris Barry. Though the community may be small in number, the passion is as evident as ever, which reassures Edmondson. Throughout his writings, Edmondson has insisted that this professional identity is not to be seen as a subset of older and politically larger disciplines, like that of general archival science or librarianship, while also admitting to the considerable internal plurality within the AV archiving profession. Edmondson premises this stance on the unique nature of audiovisual media, which he argues is where the philosophy of the profession arises from. Though there are technical distinctions, based on materiality, or epistemological and ontological differences, Edmondson's call is more political as it advocates for the AV archiving profession itself and its identity vis-à-vis other ones. As a relatively younger profession with, initial reservations towards its sister disciplines, there is political value in such a stance as it tries to gain ground and stand on its own through a position of exclusivity. Such exclusivity brings about external recognition; the profession was formally acknowledged by academia,

allowing for its own degree, and by governments, with UNESCO initiating various instruments and programs. However, these earlier demarcations may prove difficult to defend in the face of technological homogeneity with academia's move towards transdisciplinarity and with political realities spurring marginalization.

While the volume of analog AV materials currently existing in various repositories, as well as those yet to be acquired, will continue to create a backlog for audiovisual archivists to work on with their analog skill set. The nature of obsolescence and the rising amount of born digital AV materials is already reshaping the profession. One need only look at the centrality digital preservation has occupied within praxis, discourse, and curricula of the field. Of course, there are technical differences between a digital photo, a digital document, and digital audiovisual material, but digital preservation brings these objects and their related collecting disciplines closer together. It is not surprising that a formally educated audiovisual archivist would fill a digital archivist's position. The obsolescence of analog AV material, the economy of digital audiovisual content, and the inherent complexity of digital audiovisual objects—compared to its other digital iterations—pushes the AV archiving profession to take the lead in digital preservation. As this demand strengthens, the divide between material-based identities of analog and digital AV archivists widens while the latter becomes closer to other memory professionals that are looking at transdisciplinary approaches.

Audiovisual archiving's nascent position in academia forecasts an uncertain future. With both the University of East Anglia and the University of California Los Angeles programs closing, the sustainability of these formal graduate programs is also under question. Edmondson points out that this field is both without great financial gains and one that requires an expensive formal education. This has an impact on the diversity within the profession. The marginalization is exacerbated seeing as existing specialized programs are generally found in developed countries. Edmondson's current call for accreditation standards across the profession will only perpetuate the exclusivity of the profession. This divide, and its consequent impact on larger issues, should take precedence over the focus on disciplinary differences.

The self-identification and political exclusivity, re-

spective to the distinct nature of the medium under question, has enabled audiovisual archiving to assert its identity, bolstering the establishment of a profession. However, with this being more than twenty years after Edmondson raised the question, the question and its framing becomes irrelevant.

The identity politics of the profession, as defined by the nature of the object, is a sensibility once shared by archival science, which defined itself for a long time by the materiality of the physical record. As Verne Harris suggests (2002, 83), it was a problematic discourse that defined the archival endeavor primarily in terms of storage and custodianship, seeing as it conceptualized archives merely based on physicality, narrowing what the record is and what it can be used for. Contemporary critical archival theorists, such as Terry Cook, offer a corrective to Harris' views, presenting a new paradigm for archives that “replaces the profession's traditional intellectual focus on the physical record—that thing which is under our actual physical custody in archives - with a renewed focus on the context, purpose, intent, interrelationships, functionality, and accountability of the record, its creator, and its creation processes, wherever these occur” (Cook 1997, 48). The larger archiving profession now aims to see itself beyond what it collects.

Anne Gilliland (2016) warns us that more often than not that the material conditions of our profession limit us from thinking and reflecting about the archives. She asks, “how can we transform archives so that they can be more responsive to and inclusive of the diversity, dynamics and inequities of the world in which we are living? An archive which is more person-centered, more humanitarian, and more enfranchising.” The rise of community, participatory, and activist archiving is a response to this sentiment. Such movements focus neither on materiality nor on professional reflexivity. While Edmondson called on the profession to articulate what it is and what it is not, today such movements focus on articulating what it is for.

In his keynote address during the 2015 FIAF Congress, Rick Prelinger (2015) calls on the audiovisual archiving profession to do just that:

We cannot continue to rely on oversimplified, inoffensive, celebratory statements geared for public consumption [...] For the most part, moving image archives exist in a kind of teleological vacuum. It's good that we exist, but I've

yet to see much thoughtful examination as to why [...] To actively consider the reasons for our existence is also to ask: Could we, as archivists, point ourselves toward an agenda that we wish to make real?

Edmondson's call for a shared code of ethics, which is generally self-reflexive, is only one response to this call. The issues surrounding diversity within our profession and its collections, as well as the difficult conversations some of our professional associations are having on this topic are integral. However, the profession must also focus on looking outwards, to not be defined solely by the medium. As John Fleckner reflects in his presidential address to the Society of American Archivists in 1990, the notion of a profession carries with it,

the idea that as professionals we have something to 'profess'...that in this act of 'professing' we tie our own self-interest to the well-being of the larger society so that profession is not merely that of a self-interested clique, but instead, a legitimate claim on behalf of the greater public interest (1991, 12).

While film archivists have long served film scholarship and heritage as part of both the larger audiovisual archiving profession and the general archiving movement, it will need to expand its purview. At the end of his reflections, Edmondson acknowledges the unmistakable passion young professionals have entering the field, and that such a passion will guarantee the profession's future. I argue that this passion will only be of value once we are able to answer the question—what do we profess to?

## References

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