Interdisciplinarity, Specialization, Conceptualization

Archival Education Responding to Changing Professional Demands

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In his contribution to this *Synoptique* issue, Ray Edmondson traces two decades' worth of attempts—largely successful—to establish film archiving, or moving image archiving more broadly, as a substantive profession. A 'profession' is understood here as one that takes shape in an institutional context, that is reliant on a set of shared values, goals, and standards, and that is recognized as such both within the field and outside. In systematically discussing each of those requirements, the author points out that the past twenty years have been marked also by profound change for the institutions and staff concerned. We may think here of technological developments, but also transformations in terms of archives' overall operational priorities. On the one hand, of course, the period since 1995 has seen a gradual reversal in the status of digital technologies, as their use shifted from experimental to all-but-pervasive. On the other, audiovisual archives also transformed from rather closed organizations, often focused on a specific medium (film or video; but also, as Edmondson highlights, image or sound) and its associated formats, barely interacting amongst each other (let alone working together), to generally more open, cooperative ones, with a broader outlook in terms of media and a stronger sense of shared concerns (Valck 2015, 6). The latter developments are at least partly inspired by societal ones, and more specifically, by shifts in the demands placed on all kinds of herita-ge institutions. It is currently expected that such institutions make collections accessible to a range of audiences; in turn, this has warranted the use of a variety of state-of-the-art (on- and offline) technologies.

One outcome of the transformations mentioned is that the field is getting increasingly interdisciplinary. The consequences of this manifest on the work floor, but also transpire in the curricula of designated training and study programmes. This is hardly surprising, as the latter tend to operate in partnerships with relevant institutions—whether for purposes of teaching or training, or to feed the need for facilities and supervision for professional internships. Twenty years back, moving image archiving required a combination of specialist technical expertise (often provided by former media industry professionals) and media historical knowledge (aesthetic, but also techno-material, and usually brought by staff with a background in a broad range of arts and humanities subjects). These days, the work is considered to also involve, at the very least, expertise in information science, and specific programming skills. In addition to this, a convergence of concerns across the broad heritage sector (Koerber 2013, 43) has enabled, and necessitated, the enrichment of AV archival practice with experience from related fields. For instance, staff with backgrounds in fine arts conservation, or, for presentation purposes, interaction design, may already

be familiar with solutions to problems novel to our field. A similar trend also manifests in educational contexts, where the range of potentially relevant disciplines has steadily increased. This is evident in at least two ways. On the one hand, designated programmes have introduced new course modules to meet the demand for novel types of expertise.[1] On the other, they have designed assignments that require students to consult with professionals with a wide range of (highly specialist) expertise.[2]

Working in an interdisciplinary fashion, of course, requires that several areas of expertise are not just combined, but combined productively. For today's archivists and archivists-to-be, this entails that they are subject to three interrelated demands.

First, they are expected to be aware of the pertinence to their work of a range of disciplines—even if they do not practice all those disciplines themselves—and of whom, in or outside their organizations, they can turn to for specialist advice. This need is especially pressing at a time when the processes of collecting, safeguarding and making accessible moving images and sound are increasingly entwined. And arguably, it is evident in particular when preservation or presentation tasks are being outsourced. For instance, if an institution decides to hire a specialist company to take care of its online presentation, the in-house curator or programmer still needs to be aware of the affordances of relevant platforms, and of how different online channels facilitate access to the collections for different groups. Likewise, preservationists have to know the possibilities of a range of analogue and digital tools, even if they cannot operate them themselves. At the same time, they need to be aware that decisions concerning the materials' presentation may affect, or restrict, the options to choose from—even if those are (formally) taken much further down the line. For example, the parameters of digitization, even if done specifically for the purpose of restoration, will have consequences also for presentation later on.[3]

Second, today's archivists are supposed to develop, and keep developing, their own particular expertise. Considering the complexity of contemporary AV archival practice, no one person can be expected to know everything; instead, all need to cultivate a specific set of knowledge and skills, that others can in turn rely on. This is true not only for new, digital competencies, but also for the more traditional expertise that commercial service providers are quickly losing (often knowledge of analogue technologies and processes, such as photochemical duplication or the maintenance and operation of legacy projection equipment).

Third, (would-be) archivists require strong communicative skills, and a good measure of flexibility in their associations with others—especially in encounters with colleagues who use different jargons. In today's archival settings, both are essential prerequisites for cooperation towards common goals. To demonstrate this, we only need to mention how heavily all archival staff—collection specialists, preservationists, curators—rely on IT support, both in using and in devising the tools they require for their day-to-day tasks. Such collaborations presuppose that they formulate their needs precisely, but also accessibly, so that colleagues less aware of the needs of collections, or of the people who use them, can act upon them in appropriate ways. In addition, audio-visual archivists (specifically those dealing with media produced and re-/used outside of mainstream and commercial structures) increasingly need to interact with a variety of stakeholders, and in some cases, even existing "networks of care" (Dekker 2015) that have clustered around specific works or collections. As media archiving is increasingly becoming a 'distributed' practice—and no longer just a matter of official, institutional archives—the working sphere of so-called 'professionals' is expanding considerably. Inevitably, this requires a sensitivity towards a highly diverse set of interests and concerns.

For educators, those three demands entail a responsibility to enable students, on the one hand, to understand (shared) archival objectives, and on the other, to develop their own, individual specialisms. Today's AV archival curricula necessarily include broad introductions to the history and institutionalization of the field, to its constituent practices, key concerns and common procedures, and crucially, to the discourses, professional and critical, that inform them. Such a broad basis is required, as graduates will be expected to collaborate with staff with a range of responsibilities and expertise, both in the same organization and across institutional boundaries. This necessitates a broad outlook, and the ability to relate one's own tasks to those of others, within a complex, interdisciplinary whole. But at the same time, programmes also need to give participants the space to pursue their own interests. Students may bring such interests as

they enter a course of study (inspired, for instance, by prior experience in the field) or pick them up along the way. Most relevant programmes address issues in, and procedures for, the interconnected practices of collecting, preserving and presenting or reusing moving images and/or sound; in most cases, however, participants end up choosing to zoom in on either of these areas. It is important that they do, as the same will be expected of them as they enter the profession, or return to it. In most cases, they acquire specialization through practical skills training (for instance, in the context of a work placement or internship) and critical reflection (for example, in the context of an individual or group research project, or an academic thesis).[4]

The aforementioned tendency towards specialization to some extent also transpires in the outlooks of the different programmes. On the one hand, each course of study is indebted to the particular circumstances of its emergence, and to the type of institution (museum, university, college of vocational studies or university of applied sciences) or department (Library Science, Media Studies, Conservation and Restoration) in which it operates. But on the other, the complexity of AV archival organizations today, and specifically, their need for a variety of subject specialists, also requires that programmes cater to audiences with subtly different interests. For instance, archival programmes might primarily attract candidates with more of a penchant for the media historical aspects of the material, crucial to its selection and presentation, or for the technical requirements of establishing, enriching and managing digital collections, key to both its preservation and its reuse. However, as they do so, they are all bound by prospective professionals' need for a profound awareness of how those different specialities interconnect, and how choices in one area of expertise, or stage in the archival records' life cycle, affect those in others.

At the same time, educational programmes increasingly take on the task of conceptualizing AV archival issues and practices. Over the past twenty-five years, they have produced a growing number of graduates who subsequently went on to pursue doctoral degrees, often in topics relevant to the field.[5] Together, these authors have contributed a corpus of work that is much more tailored to the needs of the AV archival field than the body of literature that was available as specialist programmes first got started. Such developments also are revealing of a transfor-

mation in the nature and role of (specifically academic) archival education. If designated courses of study used to be overwhelmingly practice-driven (in that they focused on the transmission of knowledge and skills produced within, or by, the field itself), they increasingly also seek to equip students to contribute novel insights to critical debates, and even, to take careful first steps towards a further conceptualization of AV archival practice. In doing so, and thanks in part to the close cooperation between profession and training (evident also from participants' involvement in relevant associations, for instance as part of the various student chapters of the Association of Moving Image Archivists), they too have contributed to what Edmondson sees as the 'professionalization' of a field. As this is happening, complaints about the lack of relevant 'theories' (for instance, of restoration, as discussed in Meyer 1996) are gradually getting superseded.[6]

By way of recapitulation, we would like to propose that in the two decades that passed since Edmondson first posed the question "Is Film Archiving a Profession?"—also a period in which specialist educational programmes proliferated worldwide—both AV archival work and its teaching have been subject to three interrelated demands. They have been marked by a need for interdisciplinary cooperation, but at the same time (and perhaps paradoxically), also thorough specialization. Simultaneously, they required concepts and models—not only to better understand what was already happening in the field, but also in the interest of developing current practice (for instance, in response to the emergence of new types of collections, new forms of use, or new societal concerns). As we discussed, these interrelated trends derive from changes affecting the field itself, but also from the interplay and exchange with those teaching and training future employees, and producing relevant research.

The aforementioned demand for 'specialization' may suggest that over time, archiving will break down into a number of distinct professions, each requiring its own courses of study. Such a logic, however, ignores the equally profound need for interdisciplinary cooperation. After all, in the context of an audio-visual archive, one can only function properly as a specialist, if one is profoundly aware of how one's expertise ties in in turn with that of others, within a larger interdisciplinary connection. In addition, the reality of a field in constant flux also requires that one can occasionally retreat from one's

daily practice, considering it from a critical distance and reflecting on how, and whether, it still serves the larger purpose it is supposed to fulfill—both within an institution, and in society at large.

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Endnotes

1   For example, courses in digital literacy or even basic software coding, as recently offered by New York University in the context of its MA in Moving Image Archiving and Preservation.

2   For instance, the University of Amsterdam's MA in Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image has students complete their first semester work with a group project geared towards the formulation of preservation and presentation advice on complex, often recent (and yet already obsolete) films or media artworks.

3   A common example is that of silent film restoration, where practitioners have to take into the account that digital projectors cannot show a frame rate lower than 24 fps. Consequently, they need to add additional frames to the digital projection copies (the so-called Digital Cinema Packages or DCPs) in order to simulate the lower frame rates typical of silent films.

4   For instance, on the abovementioned MA in Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image— the programme we are associated with, and therefore know best—students can spend almost an entire year of their one-and-a-half-year programme focusing on one specific area of practice (e.g. preservation or access), or, if they so choose, even a specific medium or type of collection. This requires that they make relevant decisions in choosing their electives, thesis topics and internships.

5   Examples are legion, but we limit ourselves here to some of the people with whom we have worked more closely. For instance, Carolyn Frick, an alumna of the (now defunct) MA in Film Studies with Film Archiving option at the University of East Anglia (whose dissertation on the politics of preservation was later released as a book; see Frick 2011); Claudy Op den Kamp, a graduate of the same programme (who obtained her PhD with a soon-to-be published thesis on the role of copyright in access to archival film collections; see

Kamp forthcoming); Sonia Campanini, a graduate of the MA in Media Studies at the University of Bologna, with a strong focus on film heritage (who graduated with a PhD thesis on the preservation of film sound, soon out as a book also; see Campanini forthcoming); or, the guest editors of this special issue, Christian Gosvig Olesen and Philipp Dominik Keidl, both graduates of Amsterdam's Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image programme (the first of whom recently defended his dissertation on the relations between the digitization of film archives and new—digital—dispositifs for media historical research, while the second is working on a project on fan practices in, among others, the preservation and presentation of moving image heritage).

6   For examples of contributions by former students of dedicated programmes to film restoration theory—which is what Meyer 1996 was primarily concerned with—see for instance Busche 2006 (by a graduate of the University of East Anglia programme), Wallmüller 2007 (of the programme at the Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft, Berlin), or Jamieson 2015 (of the University of Amsterdam programme). In addition, of course, publications by staff are also relevant here; see for instance Fossati 2009. Another key contribution to debates on film preservation of the past ten years is Gracy 2007 (the author of which pursued a PhD on the topic after graduating with an MLIS degree at the University of California, Los Angeles, which has its own expertise in media archiving).