

Voices of Film: Enriching Moving Image Collections Through Oral History

Background

Oral histories created by filmmaking craft guilds and foundations have been documenting the lives and careers of a variety of film professionals for years, some on an ongoing basis, others through distinct projects or initiatives. These interviews touch on many aspects of film history, from artistic and technical innovation to the personal reflections and stories of filmmakers. However these projects have often been underfunded, understaffed and taken on by organizations who lack the resources to preserve and provide access to their content. In 2012, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences along with seven film craft guilds and foundations formed a filmmakers oral & visual history consortium to address this issue.

The ultimate goal of the project is to create an online digital archive where these collections will be aggregated, indexed and searchable. Currently, in order to centralize and manage collections, the Academy is offering consortium partners with storage, cataloging, digital migration and preservation assistance through the Academy Film Archive. The Academy Oral History Projects dept. is also actively recording video oral histories and seeking to further best practices and standards in oral history through co-productions with consortium partners as well as collaborations with researchers in film and oral history and leaders in the field of audiovisual preservation.

Abstract

This poster will look at two key research factors that will inform this project. These center on collecting data about existing collections, and understanding the intersection between oral history and film scholarship through better knowledge of users. To date, the Academy has gathered survey data that has highlighted important access and preservation issues facing these audiovisual recordings. However, there is also a real need to respond to the needs and interests of users as we seek to expand access to collections. For example, how do archives index and describe oral histories to make them more useful and findable in the context of film study? And how can we draw connections between existing archival resources and oral histories in innovative and meaningful ways?

Methods

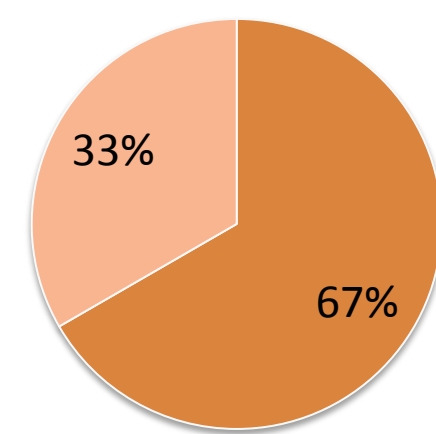
Our first objective was to collect data about existing film-related oral history collections. In order to assess the extent and status of collections, a survey was sent to 29 film organizations, of which 6 responded. The survey was targeted at both audio and video oral history collections, seeking detailed information regarding interview production, recording formats, cataloging, and accessibility, as well as project challenges and goals. As detailed below, there is a common thread of disconnect between interview creators, those managing them, and those accessing them.

Findings

Survey findings revealed that collections generally lacked any form of indexing that would contextualize and provide insight into specific content. Catalog records were created for very few of the collections surveyed in any systematic or standardized way. Collections are also in large part either closed or restricted to access by the public. This limited access is directly related to a lack of signed release forms completed for all interviews, lack of on-site viewing or web-viewing capabilities; and the fact that many older interviews exist on obsolete video formats that have yet to be migrated. Overall, respondents echoed many of the common challenges archives face when trying to manage the complexities of video preservation.

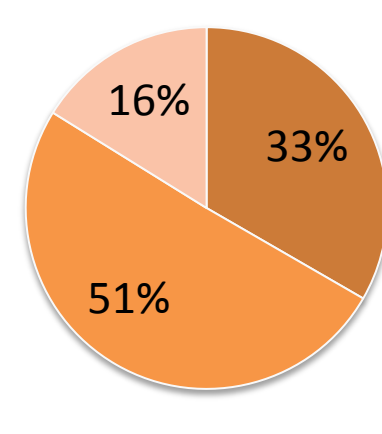
Have visual histories been indexed or cataloged?

■ No ■ Other (some cataloged, but not standardized)



What is the level of access to your collection by the public?

■ Closed ■ Restricted ■ Open



Perspectives on collections and future goals

- “Ideally, these interviews should be available to anyone who is interested in viewing them and as a complete collection...”
- “We would like to make these interviews more accessible and more integrated into our academy's other work.”
- “There just isn't an ongoing program or funding.”
- “Almost everything is an issue within this transitional context - preservation, because there is no existing preservation system for the archive and the staff need to establish one; access, because there was no consensus about the intended audience for the archive, and this needs to be established; creation, because there was never a set of guidelines for the format.”



Discussion

Further research will aim to investigate the information-seeking behavior of our potential users, be they researchers, teachers, students, writers, filmmakers, or just lovers of film. As these interviews offer a dynamic look into film history and the filmmaking process, how might we begin to understand the potential ways users will seek out and utilize this rich material?

How do we leverage our knowledge of information-seeking behavior to create meaningful descriptive metadata?

What would a multi-dimensional controlled vocabulary for film-related oral histories look like?

What are the best tools for organizing video oral history collections for cross searching?

How do we expand and engage the audience for oral history?

How might we encourage users to make connections between oral histories and related primary source material?