Moving Image and Sound Collections for Archivists
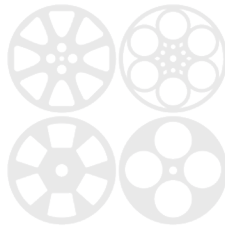
ANTHONY COCCIOLO

Printed in the United States of America.

Graphic design by Sweeney Design, kasween@sbcglobal.net.

Note: All figures and photographs were created by Anthony Cocciolo unless otherwise stated.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This book has been written for every archivist (or archivist in training) who has opened a box or file cabinet or otherwise unearthed some carrier of moving image and sound and has wondered what to do. You may have not recognized the format, you may have not known if it held video or audio, and you may have not known how to describe the item. It is even possible that you did not recognize it as a carrier of moving image and sound. I can already see our great-grandchildren using CDs as coasters! For every archivist who has struggled with moving image and sound records—maybe even pretending that tape or disc was not so different from a file folder and would fit nicely in an acid-free box nestled among paper records—this book is for you.

My primary job is teaching aspiring archivists and other information professionals at Pratt Institute's School of Information in New York City. I often find that students have familiarity with some moving image formats, such as VHS tapes and DVDs, but often have little exposure to other formats. I check their knowledge during the first week of the class Projects in Moving Image and Sound Archives, when I present students with a box full of moving image and sound media and ask them to sort the media into three types: carrier of moving image and sound, carrier of sound only, and none of the above. A three-minute countdown adds to the pressure. I witness the students get flustered as they attempt to distinguish between some things that look nothing alike and others that are very similar. Try telling the difference between a MiniDV tape, a DAT tape, and a microcassette in a rush! Often, the students encounter formats that they have no personal experience with, and as a result, they make some classification mistakes.

Professional archivists who work primarily with paper records often encounter media that they are not familiar with. One archivist interviewed for this book noted that she emailed photos of unfamiliar media to an audiovisual digitization firm to get more information. Another archivist hired a consulting

company with expertise in audiovisual media to survey and help identify media in the collections. Although both are great strategies, they highlight a common theme: professional archivists are often not trained to work with audiovisual materials. This is not surprising, as management of moving image and sound archives has not been a significant component of graduate archival education programs.[1] However, is this really a problem? Can't archivists simply rely on outside expertise to address this lack of know-how? The answer is, inevitably: it depends. But while it may be helpful to rely on outside experts, all archivists should possess some familiarity with audiovisual formats and know when to ask for help with more complex issues. Large archival institutions, such as large university or government archives, will in many cases be able to hire specialists to address their audiovisual collections. Also, larger institutions often have more robust fund-raising infrastructures, which open up funding opportunities from federal, state, local, and private sources that can support audiovisual projects. For smaller archives, including archives run by lone arrangers, obtaining outside expertise may be more of a challenge—hence the reason for this book. The goal of this book is to provide guidance on managing archival moving image and sound collections, especially for those archivists who may need to develop their own expertise or who interact with experts in their own institution or among external partners. The information in this book is based on published sources; information delivered by professionals at conferences; personal experience in research, teaching, and consulting in the area of moving image and sound records; and examples from archival practice based on interviews with archivists engaged in audiovisual projects. Interviews were conducted with archivists over the telephone and discussed issues such as types of materials stewarded, digital preservation reformatting, interacting with vendors, user access and legal issues, and fundraising for audiovisual projects, among other relevant issues.

The intended audience for this book is primarily the general archivist who may deal primarily in non–moving image and sound materials, such as paper records, and not the moving image archivist. For this reason, the book emphasizes formats that are likely to appear in a nonspecialized archive among other types of records. For example, the general archivist is likely to find many VHS tapes and (hopefully) no nitrate film prints. Since not everything can be included in a single book, and my experiences are more in general than in specialized archives, the focus here will be on the needs of the general archivist.

This book can certainly be of interest to other professionals who handle moving image and sound records, such as media asset managers, metadata specialists in television and film, independent filmmakers, and documentary filmmakers. The book may also be of interest to personal digital archivists, who may be interested in preserving family or community memories. Knowing that such individuals may happen to pick this book up for assistance with their moving image and sound assets, I have attempted to clearly define the meaning of any archivist-specific language, and I have included a glossary.

A further goal of this book is to speak directly to the realities of today's archival environments by first acknowledging the intense resource constraints that many repositories face. This book looks for applicability not only to large, well-endowed university or government archives, but also to community archives, historical societies, and lone arrangers, who have increasing needs and flat or declining resources. For this reason, the book attempts to help the archivist make sensible choices with the limited resources on hand, such as choices related to collection reformatting or setting up digital preservation infrastructure. In sum, the book assumes that work related to moving image and sound collections needs to be balanced among many competing resource-intensive demands.

It should also be noted that this book is targeted specifically at archivists and not necessarily at multimedia librarians. Library multimedia departments often circulate films on DVD, Blu-ray, or other

formats with the goal of making this content available for academic, scholarly, and other uses. This content can range from obscure independent films to Hollywood blockbusters. While the archivist, like the librarian, may need to concern himself with providing access to moving image and sound content, the archivist has an underlying responsibility to balance preservation with access. Archives preserve unique or rare content, such as oral history projects, and thus need to take into account preservation needs as well as access needs. The multimedia librarian can always order another copy of a blockbuster film on Blu-ray if the copy on hand gets damaged or lost, but mishandling the master copies of archival moving image and sound content may result in the complete disappearance of this content. Thus, while the multimedia librarian and the archivist may share some common objectives, such as helping users access moving image and sound materials, the role of preservation significantly distinguishes their roles.

With some noted exceptions, this book takes the position that preservation of and access to moving image and sound records is best advanced by reformatting them to digital formats (if they are not already digital) and engaging in digital preservation of those assets. The literature on moving image and sound preservation and access has long emphasized reformatting of materials. For example, Jerry McWilliams wrote in his book *The Preservation and Restoration of Sound Recordings* (1979) that once a vinyl disc "has been played about ten times, it is a good idea to tape it and play the tape from that point on" because "some deterioration of sound quality will occur under the best playback conditions."[2] Recommendations to reformat continued into the 1990s from archivists such as Christopher Ann Patton, who promoted the position that "a copy will have to be made for research use so that the original recording is not damaged or worn out."[3] Today, the consensus is that preservation of and access to moving image and sound recordings is best advanced through reformatting to digital formats, with the exception of film, which is discussed in more depth in chapter 8, "Film Collections." For example, William Chase, in the *ARSC Guide to Audio Preservation*, writes that "carrier deterioration and technical obsolescence make reformatting to digital files the only way to ensure future access to legacy format sound recordings."[4] Video expert George Blood notes that "all historic video formats must be migrated into file-based digital format."[5] Audiovisual archivist Joshua Ranger—in a blog post titled "For God's Sake, Stop Digitizing Paper"—argues that "for almost all formats in almost all cases, reformatting is required to preserve the signal or image, and in a growing number of cases it is absolutely required to provide any degree of access beyond looking at the physical object."[6] Anyone who has ever had a researcher return a VHS tape that has been "eaten" by a VCR or tried to find a working U-matic tape player on eBay should be able to sympathize with this logic.

Despite calls from audiovisual archivists for preservation reformatting, archivists often provide visitors with the "archival" or "master" media item, be it a VHS tape, audiocassette tape, or some other item. Archival educator and researcher Karen F. Gracy provides some reasons this practice continues. She conducted a short survey of sixteen archivists responsible for digitization and distribution of moving images and found that "resources, technological expertise, and copyright" were the major impediments to digitization.[7] Although these are admittedly serious obstacles, this book aims to help the archivist begin to overcome them, while acknowledging that there will continue to be times when providing the master media item to the researcher may be the only feasible option. But if we are to be serious about preservation and access, then digital reformatting is a practice worth striving for, even in resource-constrained environments. I am optimistic that archivists can make some headway in this area. For the last several years, I have had my students engage in digital reformatting of audio and video recordings in collaboration with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, creating today what is one of the largest digitized audiovisual lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) archives available online, including thousands of hours

of interviews, oral histories, and events, among other types of recordings.[8] If this can be achieved with no paid staff and no outsourced conversion, there are likely a number of similar arrangements that can be devised through the use of volunteers as well as through collaborations with local educational institutions. Solutions that address reformatting, including through DIY (do-it-yourself) reformatting, vendor-supported reformatting, and other options, are explored in this book.

One challenge is that the literature on reformatting of moving image and sound records is rather sparse, especially compared to resources on reformatting still images. For example, there is no video equivalent for Cornell University Library's excellent *Moving Theory into Practice: Digital Imaging Tutorial*, which provides guidance on reformatting still images.[9] This book aims to fill in some of these gaps, while also recognizing that technology changes quickly, so it is important not to be too specific about what hardware and software to use. For example, Cornell's tutorial warns those digitizing to use CRT (cathode-ray tube) computer monitors for verifying digitized works. This was sound advice in 2003 but is simply anachronistic today as progressive-scan displays, such as LED and LCD, have improved dramatically. Therefore, more basic principles will be emphasized, rather than what button to push when or what conversion device to buy now.

The eleven chapters of this book are intended to provide solid grounding for general archivists to manage their moving image and sound collections. The first part provides more general practices that can be used regardless of media types, while the second part provides guidance for specific media formats.

The first chapter looks at the topic of appraisal of moving image and sound records, which is the process of determining what records have permanent value and should be maintained by an archives. Chapter 2 addresses the topic of accessioning, arrangement, and description, which includes steps for taking custody of records, physically arranging them, and creating metadata records for them using various methods. Chapter 3 addresses legal and ethical issues, such as donor issues, copyright, and fair use, among other topics, which are essential for making moving image and sound collections available. Chapter 4 explores the topic of digital preservation, which is essential to the preservation of moving image and sound works, as nearly all new records are created through digital technology. Chapter 5 explores options for providing access to collections, looking at ways to do it yourself over the web and other options for making moving image and sound collections meaningful to users. Chapter 6 explores issues in interacting with moving image and sound producers, such as oral history makers and documentary filmmakers, with the goal of ensuring the long-term persistence of their work and possible transfer of such works to an archives.

The second part of the book provides guidance specific to media types. Chapter 7 explores the topic of managing audio collections, including formats, housing, storage, and digital conversion procedures. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 follow a similar pattern, exploring film collections, analog video collections, and digital video collections, respectively. Chapter 11 explores issues in archiving complex media, an umbrella term that captures a wide variety of media that do not easily fit into the category of "digital video," such as records embedded in software such as educational CD-ROMs. An epilogue explores some future considerations for moving image and sound archiving.

This book would not be possible without the help of many people. I would like to thank my colleagues on the SAA Publications Board for their useful feedback on drafts of this book, specifically Chair Christopher J. Prom and Nicole Milano—the book's shepherd—as well as the reviewers of the manuscript, who provided essential feedback. Further, I would like to thank the several dozen individuals who are referenced throughout this work and whose advice, research, and experience are essential components of this book. In particular, I would like to thank the archivists who agreed to

be interviewed for this book, including Elizabeth Charlton, Sarah Gesell, Rachel Grove, Lisa Lobdell, and Christina Zamon. I would also like to thank my colleagues at Pratt Institute, including the faculty, administration, and students, for their encouragement and for providing an environment in which this book could be written. I would specifically like to thank my graduate assistant for the spring 2016 term, Allison Chomet, for her assistance on the manuscript. Further, I am thankful for the use of libraries and the services of librarians, including Pratt Institute Libraries, New York University Libraries, Columbia University Libraries, and the New York Public Library.

I hope this book offers useful advice and intriguing ideas on managing moving image and sound collections to the seasoned archivist, aspiring archivist, or anyone interested in the topic. I welcome your feedback and comments for future revisions of this book. You can reach me at acocciol@pratt.edu, on Twitter at @acocciolo, and through my website, www.thinkingprojects.org.

Anthony Cocciolo
New York, 2017

NOTES

[1] Further, audiovisual records are not specifically mentioned in the curriculum section of SAA's *Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies* (2016), http://www2.archivists.org/prof-education/graduate/gpas/curriculum, permalinked on December 8, 2016, at https://perma.cc/NCE2-F5L6.

[2] Jerry McWilliams, *The Preservation and Restoration of Sound Recordings* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), 57.

[3] Christopher Ann Patton, "Whispers in the Stacks: The Problem of Sound Recordings in Archives," *American Archivist* 52, no. 2 (1990): 274–80. Also see Christopher Ann Patton, "Preservation Re-Recording of Audio Recordings in Archives: Problems, Priorities, Technologies, and Recommendations," *American Archivist* 61, no. 1 (1998): 212.

[4] William Chase, "Preservation Reformatting," in *ARSC Guide to Audio Preservation,* ed. Sam Brylawski, Maya Lerman, Robin Pike, and Kathlin Smith (Washington, DC, and Eugene, OR: ARSC, CLIR, and Library of Congress, 2015), 110.

[5] George Blood, *Refining Conversion Contract Specifications: Determining Suitable Digital Video Formats for Medium-term Storage* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2011), http://www.digitizationguidelines.gov/audio-visual/documents/IntrmMastVidFormatRecs_20111001.pdf, permalinked on April 5, 2016, at https://perma.cc/L58A-38NV.

[6] Joshua Ranger, "For God's Sake, Stop Digitizing Paper," *AVPreserve Blog*, August 25, 2014, https://www.avpreserve.com/blog/for-gods-sake-stop-digitizing-paper-2/, permalinked on September 14, 2016, at https://perma.cc/6DRP-44H6.

[7] Karen F. Gracy, "Distribution and Consumption Patterns of Archival Moving Images in Online Environments," *American Archivist* 75, no. 2 (2012): 446.

[8] Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections, http://herstories.prattsils.org, permalinked on August 30, 2016, at https://perma.cc/NET4-Q83W.

[9] Cornell University Library Research Department, *Moving Theory into Practice: Digital Imaging Tutorial* (2003), http://library.cornell.edu/preservation/tutorial/contents.html, permalinked on April 21, 2016, at https://perma.cc/7SST-6TD2.