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Reconstructing an Archive: Putting Hundreds of Thousands of Documents in Order

Abstract: This paper is an exploration of the implications, complications and negotiations inherent in making one particular collection accessible for research. An AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award has meant that for the first time, the Southern Television document collection (held at the BFI National Archive in Berkhamsted) will be used as primary research material. It also means that the collection will be structured and catalogued as it is being utilised for research. The collection itself is an unusually well preserved back catalogue of company documents that spans the breadth of Southern's tenure as the ITV franchise contract holder for the South and South East of England, from 1958 to 1981. Up until the present day, the collection has been uncatalogued, with only a 200 page typewritten finding aid to help navigate through it. There have been many methodological and logistical challenges that have resulted from the structure of this project, not least because the research and archiving efforts are happening concurrently. The BFI is in process of integrating its catalogues into its Collections Information Database (CID), and inputting the Southern Television collection into CID involves making judgments about the entire collection's structure and order. This is also an issue for a research project that cannot possibly make use of all the material, but needs to be aware of that wider context in order to carry out research into it. However, there are also huge advantages and privileges that come with having unfettered access to over 550 boxes of company documents, production documents and correspondence. In charting the ways in which the needs of the archive and the needs of the researcher collide and conflict – but also cohere - I hope to also demonstrate how working in collaboration between the academy and the archive can push forward the ideals of accessing archival material.

Bio:

Elinor Groom is a PhD candidate. Her research into the history of Southern Television is funded through the AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award, and she is co-supervised by the University of Nottingham and the BFI National Archive's Special Collections department. Last year she was awarded the Association of Moving Image Archivists' IPI Internship, and researched magnetic tape decomposition and preservation at the Image Permanence Institute at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, NY.