

The challenges facing the regional film archives

Good afternoon

On Monday morning the 17th of September 1979 I walked into 81 Dean Street in London's Soho to begin work as a cataloguer at the National Film Archive. It was my first job as a newly qualified librarian and marked the start of a 35 year (so far) journey in the public film archives.

The world in which we operate in 2015 has changed almost beyond recognition from that which I entered then though of course the underlying aims, objectives and principles of archiving moving images for public benefit have not.

What I want to explore this afternoon are the challenges we are currently facing and how I think we should be thinking about and planning to deliver these services over the next 35 years. And I am sure that much of what I am going to say will resonate way beyond the group of archives that I am going to be talking about because many of the challenges we face are the same even if the underlying motivation for the work is differently focused.

Before I begin, though, I have to make it as clear as I can that these are **my** thoughts and not some agreed manifesto of the regional film archives as a whole.

And the basis for the assumptions and examples I make and give is my own experience of establishing and running MACE which is one of the 9 moving image archives in the English regions which, along with the Scottish Screen Archive, the Wales National Film and Sound Archive, the Film and Video Dept. at the IWM and the BFI National Archive constitute the principal public archives for moving images in the UK.

These archives are all independent of each other and individually constituted but share a commitment to the selection, acquisition, preservation, documentation and accessibility of moving image materials for the benefit of everyone.

We are not unique in performing these functions because, of course there is considerable crossover in some of these activities with the many other types of collections. What singles us out as a definable sub set of the broader screen heritage industry is that we undertake all of these activities so that public benefit can be delivered **and** that all of us are, to a greater or lesser degree, (increasingly lesser these days) in receipt of public support for that work. And the receipt of public funds even at a very modest level, places a responsibility on our shoulders to focus activity in that particular way.

Delivering a public service (which, being something of a dinosaur myself, is what I think we are doing) would be an activity fully and appropriately publicly funded in an ideal world. But an ideal world is not the place in which we live. It never has been and the likelihood of it's being at some time in the future ranks somewhere just behind the lottery jackpot win which I have scheduled for myself for next week!

Funding our activity is therefore one of the critical challenges we all face and how we organize ourselves to finance even a minimum level of essential service has had a considerable bearing on how I think about us developing in the coming period.

But funding is only one challenge. The permanent preservation of moving images was challenging in 1979 when I joined the NFA...and at that stage we were only dealing with film. The additional technical challenge of preserving images captured on videotape and now in digital form provides us with new long term preservation issues that need to be addressed.

All of us archivists of one sort or another of course, share the challenges of preservation. This is not an issue which is unique to the public film archives. All kinds of film collections have an imperative to ensure that their material is properly looked after regardless of the use to which it is likely to be put. Indeed in the digital field we share the issue with a much wider constituency than just the world of moving images. The particularity of the approach we might take to achieve the preservation end will vary from organisation to organisation and will be influenced by many different factors. But the principle of the challenge is generic.

In one way or another we all are concerned too with making our collections accessible. And, as technology advances it opens up new opportunities for access both to the stuff itself and to the metadata. But these new opportunities **also** bring challenges....not least a growth in expectation which will be increasingly difficult to manage.

So let's unpack some of these things in the context of my own archive, the Media Archive for Central England.

A little context first. MACE grew out of the last wave of regional film archives (NEFA, YFA, SWFTA and MACE) which were established through the 1990s. Registered as a non profit making company in 1995 it was not until 2000 that I left the BFI NFTVA where I had been for 20 years (the last 10 as Keeper of Documentary Film) to turn the idea into some form of reality.

The 15 years has seen us located in Birmingham (briefly at the central library in 2000), Nottingham at the University from 2000 to 2006, at Leicester University from 2006-2011 and now (and I hope permanently) at the University of Lincoln. All of these institutions have been crucial in providing support for us as the organization and the collections have developed. We should not overlook the Gloucester County Archives in our catalogue of supporters for it was there that we stored the collections in the early days.

In that time we have grown the collections to the current 70,000 or so titles, have developed a dedicated and professional staff of 9 and have put into place a range of services which we provide both locally to our hosts at the University and across the whole of the East and West Midlands.

Like all archives we select and acquire, research and document, preserve and make available a collection of stuff. Acquisition is one of the three legs (the others being preservation and access) that the public archives stand on. Take one of these away and the whole thing falls down.

Our remit at MACE is to focus on moving images which inform and enhance our understanding of the culture and history of the East and West Midlands.

And this presents us with the first challenge. It's a broad remit and one which we, I think quite rightly, interpret broadly.

But how do we make sure that the collection we amass is in some way representative of the region? Indeed should we be trying to ensure that we have a balanced coverage? And if so what do we mean by balance? – balanced geographically, balanced temporally and balanced demographically so that the experience of all the communities is somehow reflected?

Or should we not worry about that but consider what comes forward and occasionally use project activity to target particular collection areas for proactive activity?

But if we are not proactively collecting how do we encourage everyone to consider depositing material with us for long term preservation? What on earth would we do if everyone did decide to do that because, where the challenge may still be that there is relatively little material from the early years there is now a proliferation. Conversely however and perhaps ironically the more that has been produced (and we can broadly say in quantity terms film – modest, video - much more – and digital huge) the less has been surfaced to us. Is that because it is not old enough yet? Or is it because video and digital do not have the kind of cache that a reel of film has? Or is it actually back to the fact that we have not been sending out the message that this material is of potential archival interest and value?

So a first challenge is how to ensure that material appropriate to our collection actually arrives in the archive.

And let's assume that we have been successful in developing a broad range of material to select from – and arguably the best collection should derive from a rich array of possible material for inclusion – How are we going to cope with making that selection?

What is in the archives will form the basis of our understanding of film and, at least in part, of our understanding of the world it reflects in years to come. Making the selection decision is probably the most significant act of the professional archivist. Having the resources to make that decision is therefore critical.

And once we have the stuff, what of preservation. The changing technologies seem to offer some solutions – and certainly the public perception (where the public has a perception) is that they have the capacity to resolve everything. But we are archivists. We know that this is not the case. We know that, whilst they do offer some solutions, they also introduce problems.

We know the potential for the loss of information in the transfer. The traps of many different formats with loss through compression etc. We know the way that the new technologies can also influence colour, speed, aspect ratio and we know that, as archivists we need to be alive to how these can happen.

We know that new technologies are even less stable as long term storage media for images than tape, and tape was more unstable than film, and we know that film is nearly obsolete now.

We are archivists. It is not our place to be in the vanguard of new technology. We should evaluate and make considered decisions about which systems to introduce. But our experience is that by the time we have evaluated and made the decision – and it will almost certainly be a decision which carries with it considerable cost – by the time the decision is made the choice we have made is probably at best about to be superseded by some upgrade or a next level of quality.

If we are going to move into the digital world especially if we are moving images created on film into the digital world we need to be sure that we recognize and acknowledge

that the medium is not the same and what we see is essentially different – even if that difference is relatively small and getting smaller.

It is now possible to recreate the quality level of a film frame by digital scanning – and that is a fantastic advance because even if we lose film in time – we might be able to maintain the picture quality in this new medium. But at what cost? File sizes are monstrous. The infrastructures required to hold and manipulate large files are problematically expensive. And over time we are faced with regular migration or the maintenance or emulation of old machines and codecs to decode the files we have. From where I stand the future looks more uncertain in technology terms than at any time in my long film archiving experience.

And what of access - the third leg of our three legged edifice?

What change in attitude to access since 1979. The NFA was still what Penelope Houston called 'Fortress archive' We were preserving for posterity but there was no sign of the arrival of posterity any time soon. Indeed access was so low down the agenda that if we were carrying out preservation from a negative copy we would make a fine grain and stop. Preservation achieved but the film still not available even for screening on a steenbeck on the premises.

The years since then have seen a transformation both in attitude and availability. And rightly so. But there is still frustration from the user side because not everything is available and available now...like it is on You Tube....and there is frustration on the archive side because so many barriers still have to be overcome in order to make something accessible. Copyright, cost, cataloguing and research all of these things can stand in the way.

And in the end we have to understand that, desirous as we are to help make our resources available, the archives are not lending libraries – and even in these accessible days we don't intend to be -it's not what we are or are for.

To do the things we do requires money...Quite a lot of it actually if we are to do them well and at the level that would deliver a really good archive service.

And here is our first really serious stumbling block.

Frustratingly, infuriatingly, and actually plain wrongly, film is still not a medium whose archival value is recognized. Its importance to a general understanding of the past it depicts ie as a medium of record is not recognized. The importance of the history of the medium itself and of the art form that it also represents is neither recognized or valued. One look at the comparative level of subsidy given to the opera house, or to the major national art collections or to the British Library or the national museums tells you that straight away.

Added to that we are talking about archives – and archives of all sorts have ever been the poor relation in terms of funding support.

So film archives don't have, have never had and are unlikely to have in the near future any appropriate level of funding without some serious change in the political climate and the attitude to the relationship between taxation, services and funding.

So what do we do about that?

The first thing is that we – the smaller archives operating in the public sector – need to understand that the world has changed. I have already said that I cling to the last straw of the idea of public service but I also recognize that to deliver that service we have to live in the world we occupy not the one we would like to be in.

I am incredibly grateful to our colleagues at the BFI for the support they manage to find for us. They are under just as much pressure financially as we are – it's just on a different scale.

I know that we should, together, continue to make case for a proper level of public support for the work that we do. I think it would be quite wrong to capitulate and meekly accept what I am sure we all believe is wrong.

But at the same time we have to recognize that, whilst we continue to argue the case we have only two options. To wither and die or to change the way we do things.

I think it's already pretty clear to most of us in the smaller archives, especially those which still have a modicum of independence, that we need to earn – we must generate income. Actually we are, especially compared to our colleagues in the document archive service, in a lucky position. The materials we hold have a value and we can, do and must use that value to lever resource for us to be able to carry the service forward. We need to be clear to users of all of our services that while we may once have been subsidized to provide storage or access to the collections for free, those days have passed.

If the user is not paying for that work to be done through taxation, they must pay directly. It's the world we live in so it's the world we must embrace.

At MACE I have set targets to increase earnings. To achieve that we are entering a professional and very competitive market place. Our response is to gear up to become ever more professional, to develop better services and better access to an increasing amount of material. In short to run a kind of commercial library operation – but to do it properly not just to dabble. Other services we offer we will also charge for either directly or by seeking project funds to support their delivery.

It's a hard place for an old public servant like me but it's one way of meeting the challenges we are facing.

So far so good – but I don't believe that this is the long term solution. A properly organized and professional commercial service should always be part of the offer but I think we need a much more radical root and branch look at the sector as a whole.

The move from analogue to digital opens up the potential to develop completely new ways of working together and to develop the back office operations in a way which exploits the advantages and shares the burdens which the new technologies bring.

It's a very difficult thing to pull off but somehow we need to find a way of developing a national digital repository, a national digital preservation centre, a central research and cataloguing function with a single shared database meeting all the standards which supports the BFI, the IWM if they wish, and the archives in the regions and nations.

The trick is that while we want to secure the benefit that such an aggregation might introduce, the partners who create the facility to support their work must retain their own independence and identity in the development and delivery of the services they run in each of their regions.

A single organisation run from the metropolitan centre with a series of local/regional outposts would fail to recognize and appropriately respond to the nuances of the regions, sub regions and communities they seek to serve. I have been on both sides of this fence I know. And actually working as MACE does, across 2 regions, has given me a really sharp insight into how different the two regions are and how different the counties are, and how different the districts are in the counties. It's only when you work on the ground that you really understand how varied the different ways are that different communities engage – or don't.

But in a world of diminishing resources the way forward I believe is to explore the potential for joint working initiatives and build towards a flexible structure, independent and responsive on the ground across the country but supported by a central service function independent of all of the organisations it services.

If we were designing a national/regional public archive service or services to look after the unique and wonderful heritage of moving image materials for the nation we would never design what we have.

The real challenge is to resolve the issue and address the problems **whilst at the same time** retaining the best elements of the really quite remarkable diversity of activity and organisations on the ground.

The first generation has created the platform and shown in small ways what is possible. The challenge for the next generation of archivists is to build on our foundations. I wish them good luck!