Unhiding Archival Media Assets through Digitization at Ball State University Archives and Special Collections

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Mixed Media: Working with Audio and Visual Materials—
Heather Fox, Assistant Editor, University of Louisville

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Unhiding Archival Media Assets through Digitization
at Ball State University Archives and Special Collections

By Michael Szajewski, Carol Street, and Brandon Pieczko, Ball State University

The notion of unhiding previously “hidden” collections is frequently invoked in the archival profession as a justification for increased attention to the processing, digitization, and description of archival materials. As the narrative goes, by removing barriers to access and developing robust metadata for archival materials, archivists can allow new audiences to engage with primary source materials in diverse and dynamic ways.

Staff at Ball State University Archives and Special Collections have realized the vast benefits of this unhiding process through a strong commitment to in-house digitization and digital collection building. The result, a CONTENTdm repository containing over 200,000 unique records branded as the Digital Media Repository, has enhanced reference, instruction, and outreach for the unit, whose collection areas include the Stoeckel Archives of Local History, the Ball State University Archives, and the Drawings and Documents Archive documenting Indiana’s built environment. This unhiding process has been especially transformative for the unit’s audio, film, and video collections.

Within the past five years, significant progress has been made by Ball State University Libraries in digitizing media in many formats from Archives and Special Collections, including 8mm and 16mm film, reel-to-reel audiotapes, audiocassette tapes, and videotapes (VHS, Betacam, and U-matic). By expanding its staff and collection of media digitization hardware, the Libraries’ Metadata and Digital Initiatives unit has built over 32 unique audio and video collections in the Digital Media Repository containing over 6,260 records.

When equipment was unavailable to capture certain formats, digitization was outsourced to a vendor. Archival media assets were uploaded to Mediasite, Ball State University’s campuswide video and audio hosting platform. A custom-built media player designed by Library Information Technology and Services allowed these assets to be easily accessible in the CONTENTdm repository.

Digital media assets now available online include oral history interviews documenting the diverse experiences of Muncie and Delaware County residents, lectures and speeches delivered by prominent guests on the campus of Ball State University, television news and discussion programming from WIPB-TV, film of athletics events from Ball State University and Muncie-area high schools, and film documenting political activities, social life, and business and industry in Muncie.

Ball State University Libraries Digital Media Repository homepage.

Muncie and Delaware County Films and Videos homepage.

Digital Media Repository, Ball State University Libraries.

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The unhiding of archival materials provides unique benefits for audio, video, and film collections considering the existence of additional barriers to their use. Playing analog media can be cumbersome, especially in the setting of an archives reading room, and requires technical familiarity with obsolete hardware that many archival patrons lack. Degradation issues with many formats also render repeated playback a preservation risk. Furthermore, time-based archival media assets in analog formats often lack in depth of descriptive metadata when compared with that of their digital counterparts. Many archival films and videotapes at Ball State University Archives and Special Collections were merely described with a basic title and date written on the item or container at the time of creation.

Through the process of digitization, review, and description, Archives and Special Collections was able to create robust descriptive metadata that describes the people, places, and events depicted within each media asset. A U-matic tape simply labeled "Ball State Today, 1987/04/16" became, when digitized and reviewed, an interview news program with footage of press conferences given by Henry Kissinger and Lee Hamilton discussing US-Soviet relations and the Iran-Contra affair on their visits to Ball State University. These additional access points enhanced the discoverability of our digitized media assets to a broader base of potential digital patrons and increased the efficiency of our reference service. Because of the preservation risks posed by repeated playback of some analog media, a review and description process of this nature would have been unfeasible without digitization.

Easy access to richly described audio and video content has transformed outreach efforts, allowing Archives and Special Collections to develop more dynamic exhibit displays, engaging programming events in the local community, productive partnerships with local media, and a visible presence on social media platforms. Beginning in early 2013, Archives and Special Collections partnered with The Star Press, Muncie’s newspaper, to develop "Muncie’s Reel History," an online video series featured on the newspaper’s website. Individual installments of the series featured digitized film or video from the collection along with an interview by The Star Press of Archives and Special Collections staff regarding the highlighted content.

In spring 2015, Archives and Special Collections cosponsored a public screening of a digital version of The Man Haters, a 1915 silent film produced in Muncie, Indiana, starring a cast of local residents. Digitization of the original nitrate film allowed Archives and Special Collections to share an important piece of Muncie’s history that was not previously viewable due to preservation and liability concerns. Nearly 200 community members attended the event, which not only promoted archives resources but also helped establish fruitful partnerships with community organizations including the county historical society and downtown businesses.

Digitized media content also proved to be popular on Lost Muncie, a community-run local history Facebook group. In many cases, local residents have provided additional details and background information regarding the digitized content.

Since the installation of a dedicated computer monitor in the exhibit space in 2014, Archives and Special Collections has curated six exhibits featuring custom thematic videos created from digitized audiovisual assets from the Digital Media Repository. The incorporation of digital videos has noticeably attracted previously casual passersby, encouraging them to interact with exhibits in a manner that a display of analog archival objects alone might not have been able to achieve.

The College of Architecture and Planning Guest Lecture Series transformed from a collection of audiocassette and VHS tapes quite literally hidden in the college’s storage closet to a valuable resource for the university and for researchers worldwide. While the Drawings and Documents Archive’s scope is limited to the built environment
within the geographic boundaries of the state of Indiana, the Guest Lecture Series vastly broadens that territory with recordings dating from 1965 to the present featuring lectures by nationally and internationally known architects and planners.

The availability of digitized historic media has also enhanced student engagement with the content in both instruction sessions and course projects. Students in Ball State University’s College of Architecture and Planning have relied heavily on digitized archival media when developing documentaries exploring the history of Muncie buildings and neighborhoods for an environment and culture course. Students in the Department of History’s Introduction to Digital History course have incorporated this digitized media content into thematic research projects, compiling digitized primary source materials to develop narratives related to Ball State University history topics. Students have also utilized digitized audiovisual recordings from the archives in immersive learning projects like the MLK Dream Team “Freedom Bus,” a traveling exhibit documenting the history of the civil rights struggle in east central Indiana.

By contributing to the Ball State University Libraries YouTube account, Archives and Special Collections has further extended the reach and visibility of its digitized media collections. In the last seven months, nearly 100 montages and full videos have been added to the YouTube channel, accumulating nearly 8,000 views. Popular videos on the channel include footage of Paul Newman visiting Ball State University to campaign for Eugene McCarthy in 1968, a Welcome to Muncie promotional video from 1988, and footage of a high school homecoming parade from 1968 in nearby Yorktown, Indiana.

While the Drawings and Documents Archive remains primarily a regional archive, this digital collection provides unique and valuable resources to architectural scholars worldwide who are now using the recordings for their research. The collection continues to grow, adding historic lecture recordings donated by college faculty and newly recorded lectures from the ongoing series on campus. Students who missed the lecture in real time are able to participate in the conversation about it.
A review of Digital Media Repository use statistics confirms the success of the unhiding-through-digitization narrative. In the past two years, digitized archival media assets in the Digital Media Repository and on the YouTube channel have been accessed over 52,000 times by online users. These results confirm the value of ongoing digitization and description of archival media assets in expanding and diversifying Archives and Special Collections’ patron base.

Notes