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Mixed Media: Working with Audio and Visual Materials

Midwest Archives Conference

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I admit it: I’m a media archivist. You know: film, video, sound recordings, that sort of thing. As you’ll see a bit later, they present their own unique challenges as archival materials. It’s not that I totally lay awake nights worrying about this, but if a new, practical, and sensible way came along for managing them I might get a little more rest.

In 2005 came that now-renowned treatment that promoted a radical look at the traditional management of archival collections. Dubbed “minimal processing” (or as it has become more commonly known, MPLP, for “More Product, Less Process,” the main title of the groundbreaking article), authors Dennis Meissner and Mark Greene slashed away at archival tradition with abandon. It posits that it’s not that we’re not good enough or dedicated enough or fast enough or meticulous enough to process our holdings. Rather it’s that we’re shackled to the tedious traditions of detailed processing we learned as pups. Our methods of processing, not our incapacity to do it “right,” is the real enemy of archival access and processing success—and by association, backlogs. The minority of naysayers aside, the archival world sighed collectively in relief. Minimalism has become the new black.

It’s important to note that the Meissner-Greene grant-funded project was backed up by copious data, mostly scary stories of backlogs and time estimates fit for telling around the campfire on a dark night. They focused on larger twentieth century collections of records as their baseline, admittedly focusing on “the paper issues.” They also invoked relevant snippets from archival literature, significantly from when such literature was young, suggesting even then that we may undermine a smooth transition between finding aid and user. This at least is suggested by the results of the Meissner-Greene survey. As an aside, I should mention the idea posited by the Council on Library and Information Resources in its 2001 report that the complexity of audiovisual materials and the means of duplication greatly outpace those of standard paper documents. They’re just plain harder to deal with, and, therefore, easier to ignore in a multi-format repository.

The exclusion, I suspect, can be explained in a few of ways. First, the processors have little experience in identifying audiovisual formats; second, the same goes for the various audiovisual genres; and third, the repository lacks the means to reformat or to offer access to audiovisuals. All may undermine a smooth transition between finding aid and user. This at least is suggested by the results of the Meissner-Greene survey.

Why? Audiovisuals are organically and substantively different than any other kind of document. In addition to their chemical makeup and the unique form of content they hold, they are machine dependent; that is, they rely on technology for both their creation and their use. The unaided senses won’t suffice. Moreover, in the relatively short time they’ve existed they have gone through a greater evolution than any other document type, except possibly electronic records (which, by the way, a large percentage of audiovisuals may be considered). From its first iterations, this format evolution has skipped merrily through more than a century hand-in-hand with its own doppelgänger, format obsolescence, leaving archivists in a wake of an extraordinary challenge: how to provide access.

This brings us back to MPLP. . . . The literature I perused, some of which the Meissner and Greene article has spawned, doesn’t give specific attention to audiovisuals as either
unique or typical documents. One exception is in MPLP’s own Appendix A, “Survey on the Practice and Definition of Processing: Summary Data,” which, among other things, gathers statistics on the following: how many repositories make use copies of all A-V [sic] materials; how many make use copies of audiovisuals on demand; and how many migrate obsolete formats to current formats. The questions are unqualified by quantity. While the responses to the first and third of these questions are less than encouraging, the second holds the most significant data regarding use: 38 percent of the respondents make copies on demand—what you’d expect from repositories that list audiovisuals on an item level.8

All three queries relate mostly to preservation, and, in part, to access. As far as preservation goes, Meissner and Greene suggest that one reason for extreme backlog is an “excessively cautious” infatuation with preservation, that same impulse that leads you to remove staples and such.9 But audiovisuals deserve that caution, given their machine dependence, format obsolescence, and the inherent chemical instability of the various formats. A good environment is a step in the right direction, but only a step. Audiovisuals call for more aggressive means of preservation.

As enlightening as the MPLP survey is, there are a couple of others that blow it out of the water in terms of giving us a broad view of how audiovisuals fit into the world of historic resources. The first, conducted in 1998 by the National Council of State Historical Records Coordinators, endeavored to get a snapshot of the historical profession by gathering information on the holdings of historical societies, academic and public libraries, museums, and the like. Among the plethora of interesting statistics, the report found that audiovisual materials are found in abundance by all kinds of institutions. A whopping 46 percent of the respondents confessed to housing sound recordings, 50 percent videotapes, and 24 percent motion picture film, taking up 0.8 percent, 0.6 percent, and 1.4 percent of their storage space, respectively. Not only that, but 26 percent admitted that they actively collected sound recordings, 32 percent videotapes, and 10 percent motion picture film.

A more recent report, Heritage Preservation’s A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America’s Collections from 2005,10 indicates that out of nearly 31,000 respondents, 30 percent hold recorded sound materials and 37 percent hold moving images, totaling an estimated 86 million audiovisual items in the hands of archives, historical societies, museums, and libraries in America. The report further makes this note on the preservation status of audiovisuals: “The condition of almost half the 86 million film reels, videos, DVDs, records, cassettes, CDs, and MP3s in public collections is unknown, leaving them in probable jeopardy.”11

This data certainly gives credence to the need for an MPLP-style processing scheme, if for no other reason than the sheer numbers of materials and their apparent physical condition. One attempt to meld condition, potential use (historical value), broad content, and other factors as a way to implement MPLP with photographs was made at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, documented by Anne L. Foster in her Archival Issues article “Minimum Standards Processing and Photograph Collections.”12 Foster and her staff found its greatest inspiration in Meissner and Greene’s concept of “ideal” processing; they deftly mixed minimal and detailed description as the situation suggested, and found that thoughtful appraisal standards provided the backbone of their success. Their conclusion: the “flexibility inherent in the MPLP technique is well suited for . . . such special format materials.”13

This example shows that MPLP doesn’t eschew the item level, but embraces it when called for. And audiovisual materials may be prime candidates for this mix of treatments. As Meissner and Greene suggested of other materials—and as this article has illustrated—audiovisuals are “retrieval intensive.”14 Whether a scene in a home movie, a speech on a disc, a promotional film, an oral history project, or a 20-year collection of news footage, all are in themselves “items.” But in the end it is their machine dependency that sets audiovisuals apart from any other documents in archives.

Perhaps what happened with photographs in Alaska can happen in the Lower 48 with audiovisuals. Perhaps it’ll be me who tries it. I could use the sleep.

Notes
2. Ibid., 242–243.
4. Photographs often can be added to this lot. Unless a piece of literature is specifically about sound recordings, moving images, or photographs, these out-of-the-

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ordinary documents sadly are glossed over at best. For an example, see Frederick Miller's comments in Anne L. Foster, “Minimum Standards Processing and Photograph Collections,” Archival Issues 30:2 (2006): 108.


8. On the item level, titles are nice if you have them, as they can lead to reference sources that give more information on the audiovisual item. They might, in themselves, suggest the topic of a film without additional coaxing—or not. My favorite film titles from the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society are Pigs of the Past, Mixing Brains with Ink, and The Squad in Short Skirts.


14. Ibid., 117.