

4-1-2011

Saving Community Video

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Recommended Citation

Fox, Heather (2011) "Saving Community Video," *MAC Newsletter*: Vol. 38 : No. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/macnewsletter/vol38/iss4/7>

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Mixed Media: Working with Audio and Visual Materials— Paul Eisloeffel, Assistant Editor, Nebraska State Historical Society

Saving Community Video

By Heather Fox, Project Archivist, Appalshop Archive, Whitesburg, Kentucky

Introduction

Black and white static resolves into footage of a woman standing in a crowded town hall in Norton, Virginia, demanding an answer from the city officials to a simple question: why *can't* they change an existing law to ban strip mining near her town and protect her children from the resulting pollution? The scene is electric. It is the early 1970s, and when the woman relinquishes the floor, another mother rises to second her concern. Throughout the scene the all-male town council sits at a long table facing their constituents in an uncomfortable silence, not even acknowledging the question. Several more women add their comments, and then a grandfatherly man stands up at the back of the room and reminds the audience that “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.” He declares his admiration for the women who he has just watched stand up to the powers that be as his speech breaks down into static, and then the screen turns blue.

This amazing 12-minute scene of community activism, female power, coal mining history, and Appalachian history was captured on a ½" open-reel videotape that came to the archive labeled “Football #3.” Part of the Mountain Community Television (MCTV) Collection in the Appalshop Archive, this vignette exemplifies the potential richness of documentation found on moving image formats and the challenges of providing access to such material.¹

Appalshop and the Archive

Founded in 1969, Appalshop is a media arts center located in Whitesburg, Kentucky, dedicated to promotion and preservation of Appalachian life. Over the last 40 years, Appalshop has supported filmmakers documenting the Appalachian experience, and the archive has collected the fruit of their production. The archive cares for more than four thousand hours of video and one million and eight hundred thousand feet of 16-mm film in climate-controlled storage. Video formats include ½", ¾", and 1" video. Holdings include completed titles and production elements.²

In 2005, Appalshop received a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to preserve and provide access to their collections. These funds, along with a grant from the National Historical Publications

and Records Commission, financed the reformatting of the original ½" open-reel tapes in the MCTV collection to digital betacam preservation copies and the production of DVD access copies.

An Untapped Resource Worthy of Preservation

In a special section on twenty-first-century archives in *Cinema Journal*, Margaret Compton notes the importance of providing access to television collections that contain content outside the well-known series that are readily available on DVD. She urges media scholars to contact regional archives in pursuit of untapped sources of information on television programming like cable access.³ The MCTV collection is just such a collection.



Woman speaking at Norton, Virginia, town council meeting. Screenshot from Mountain Community Television Collection. Courtesy of the Appalshop Archive.

Comprised of over one hundred ½" open-reel videotapes dating from 1972 to 1978, the MCTV collection includes footage of bluegrass festivals, high school football games, town meetings, prisoners discussing rehabilitation and prison life, coal miners rallying, citizen activists organizing to save their land from a power company, and a variety show produced by children. MCTV produced these programs as part of an effort to document life in Southwestern Virginia and to provide local programming that would be shown on the local public access cable channel.⁴ Like other media activists around the country, MCTV producers were inspired by the potential of portable video technology to create community video. They established

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their production facilities as an affiliate of Broadside Television, a small, independent non-profit production company founded by Ted Carpenter and located in Eastern Tennessee. Broadside TV became operational in 1974, and through it Carpenter aimed to harness newly portable video technology to provide locally videotaped programming to counteract the prevalent “lack of authentic information on living in the Appalachian mountains.”⁵ MCTV shared resources and staff and also succumbed to the same fate as Broadside, which encountered funding difficulties and was forced to close down in 1978. One of the MCTV producers eventually donated the open reel tapes in his possession to Appalshop so they could be preserved.



Mountain Community Television cameraman shooting an image of himself in a funhouse mirror at the Southwest Virginia and Eastern Kentucky District Fair in Wise County, Virginia. Screenshot from Mountain Community Television Collection. Courtesy of the Appalshop Archive.

Cataloging It

Clearly, collections such as MCTV can provide a view of history not offered by mainstream media, yet providing access to them presents myriad challenges. Machine dependence of media presents technical challenges to access, an issue discussed in a recent “Mixed Media” article.⁶ This article, however, focuses on challenges to intellectual access.

As the example above indicates, the videotapes came to the archive with very little information. “Football #3” describes only a portion of the program captured on the tape. In many cases, however, tape labels can also provide a building block for research into the subject of each title. Since the collection is relatively small and Appalshop can devote the resources to viewing each tape, we have the luxury of providing richer

description than institutions that must rely on labels and associated information. For example, intertitles and credits can supply information about individuals responsible for creation of the asset. Narration and interviews can provide context that facilitates subject analysis or helps date the production. Even incidental signage can provide identifying information.⁷

As we view the videotapes, we catalog them at the item level into a modified version of the Independent Media Arts Preservation (IMAP) Cataloging Project template. Based on MARC and Archival Moving Image Materials—A Cataloging Manual (AMIM), the IMAP cataloging template is intended to help independent media makers and small institutions gain control over their videotape collections, thus facilitating preservation and access to this important part of our cultural history.⁸ Despite our work to catalog at this level, we are still exploring options for on-line access to the item-level description.

Collection-level description will provide us with an interim solution, while facilitating description of another aspect of the collection. Not only do the individual videotapes show Appalachian life and culture, the collection as a whole reflects an important part of audiovisual history. As mentioned above, the MCTV collection is the product of the early community media movement fostered by the availability of portable video equipment. Creation of a collection-level DACS-compliant finding aid allows for inclusion of contextual description.⁹ Northeast Historic Film, another regional moving image archive, follows similar practice, cataloging at both the collection and item level.¹⁰

Conclusion

Clearly, many challenges exist to providing access to moving image collections: time, money, mislabeled tapes, and ever-evolving cataloging methods. However, seeing black and white footage from the 1970s of a woman standing up in a town council meeting and taking the decision-makers to task for not doing right by her children proves beyond a doubt that these are challenges worth overcoming.

Notes

1. “Football #3,” Mountain Community Television Collection, Appalshop Archive.
2. The term “production elements” describes items such as raw footage and uncut interviews that are used in creating a final product.

3. Margaret Compton, "The Archivist, the Scholar, and Access to Historic Television Materials," *Cinema Journal* 46 (2007): 131–132.
4. Deirdre Boyle, "From Portapak to Camcorder: A Brief History of Guerrilla Television," *Journal of Film and Video*, 44:1/2 (1992): para. 23, <<http://www.experimentalvcenter.org/history/people/ptext.php?id=13&page=1>> (18 October 2010)
5. "Homegrown is Fresher: Broadside TV Pioneers in Regional Video Programming," *Appalachian Journal* 7:4 (1974): 13.
6. Paul Eisloeffel and Kopana Terry, "Motion Picture Film and Magnetic Tape: A Short Primer," *MAC Newsletter* 37:4 (2010): 22–25.
7. For example, we determined the date of a videotape of a bluegrass festival from the banner hanging behind the performers.
8. For more information about the IMAP cataloging template, go to the Independent Media Arts Preservation Cataloging Project Web site, http://www.imappreserve.org/cat_proj/index.html. Archival Moving Image Materials is an on-line guide based on chapter seven of the *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules*, 2nd edition, provided on-line via the Cataloger's Reference Shelf at <http://www.itsmarc.com/crs/arch0682.htm>. See also, *The Compendium of Moving Image Cataloging Practice*, published in 2001 by the Association of Moving Image Archivists and the Society of American Archivists. This guide provides cataloging examples from a diverse range of institutions.
9. We have completed a DACS-compliant finding aid for another videotape collection here: <http://kdl.kyvl.org/cgi/f/findaid/findaid-idx?c=kyead;cc=kyead;q1=appalshop;rgn=main;view=text;didno=headwatersfa>. Organized by broad subject, descriptive information for each episode was easily transferred from the item-level IMAP database maintained on-site.
10. See Northeast Historic Film, <http://www.oldfilm.org> (18 October 2010).



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