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Final Project

Gay Cable Network Collection

First Stage of Assessment

Collection assessment is a pivotal process for integrating a collection into an archive. In June of 2009, New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections acquired the Gay Cable Network's (GCN) archive. One part of the collection contains the original source material for GCN's news programs, which needs to be processed into the library before an assessment can take place. While a complete collection assessment requires several steps, this project only focused on the first stage of sorting and organizing the collection. This is an important process as it allows the archivist to gain a preliminary view of the types of materials and condition of the collection. As a final project, assisting with this collection offers an on-hands experience with a moving image collection, and allows me to gain a better understanding of the process that is involved and the importance of collection assessments.

The Gay Cable Network was one of the first stations completely devoted to the LGBT movement and community. Founded by Lou Maletta in 1982, the channel aired until 2001. The station was located in New York, but showcased news and events from all over the country. The first show to be broadcasted on GCN was "Men & Films," a

program that explored gay films and male erotica. The channel soon began broadcasting more programs including “Gay USA,” which featured current events from across the US, and “Be Our Guest.” GCN offered viewers an array of programming that featured programs on politics, LGBT activism, current events, health issues, gay films, erotica, etc. However, perhaps the most significant contribution of GCN is its early coverage of the AIDS crisis. Since the first diagnosis in 1981, AIDS was considered a taboo topic because it was a sexually transmitted disease and the early cases predominately hit the gay men. In fact, it took President Reagan several years to finally mention AIDS publicly. While other stations were ignoring AIDS or simply addressing it as the “Gay Disease,” GCN was the first network to regularly provide information on HIV/AIDS and helped educate viewers on what was happening and how to protect themselves. This part of the GCN archive is particularly important for researchers and historians because it offers a glimpse into the beginning of the AIDS crisis and how the gay community not only was affected, but how they addressed AIDS awareness. AIDS is still a pertinent issue as there is still no cure for the disease. The nineteen-year run of the Gay Cable Network was a milestone for the LGBT community and in public television history. It is one of the largest and most important LGBT media collection in existence¹ and it is imperative to preserve.

During the summer of 2009, NYU’s Fales Library and Special Collections acquired GCN’s archives. After GCN’s final broadcast in 2001, Lou Maletta kept all of the station’s archives in his Midtown office. However, Maletta eventually needed to sell his office space and no longer had space for the archive. Due to the significance of the

¹ “NYU’s Fales Library Acquires Gay Cable Network Archives.” NYU Press Release. 16 June 2009. Accessed online. 21 October 2009. <http://www.nyu.edu/public.affairs/releases/detail/2699>

collection, there were several contenders; however the Fales Library was eventually granted the opportunity to purchase the archive. The collection fits into Fales' Downtown Collection, which showcases New York's avant-garde art scene, which also contains many sources depicting the LGBT community and activism. The Fales Library is a good location for the GCN collection as it keeps the New York based materials in New York. Also, since Fales is part of New York University, it ties into the scholarly setting and will be a great resource for many programs including the Gender & Sexuality and Cinema Studies programs. The amount for which Fales purchased the archive was not very large as the cost for preserving the collection will be quite expensive. The collection as a whole contains between approximately 6,000-6,500 items, which are comprised of U-Matic, VHS, Hi8, 8mm, MiniDv, VHSC, and S-VHSC video formats. Many of the nearly 4,000 U-Matics are the broadcast masters and approximately 1,000 items are VHS; some of which contains unique footage, but most are commercial videotapes used for clips in programs such as "Men & Films²." The remaining items, which are comprised of the smaller gauges, are the unedited, raw source material used for GCN's programs. The ultimate goal is to reformat the collection and make it accessible for researchers and students.

There are several obstacles in the preservation process, which will make this process somewhat difficult and lengthy. When preserving video, Fales usually has a DigiBeta Master copy, DVD sub master copy, and a DVD access copy created. However, because of the size of this collection, it would be too expensive to make these copies for each title. Instead, the plan is to make a digital file preservation master of each

² Brent Phillips. Interview. November 23, 2009.

item. With a digital file master, researchers and students can access the footage they wish to see through a server, which they will be able to access when they are in the Fales Library Reading Room. Another issue that has arisen is while transferring some of the U-Matics, there are already some signs of deterioration and therefore are a higher priority now. Lastly, NYU's Preservation Department does not have the capabilities to transfer Hi8 and 8mm video formats, so those materials will have to be shipped out to a preservation house. In the case of the smaller formats, since they will have to be shipped out of house, a Digibeta master copy will be created. Since the collection is rather larger, it's expected to take several years and lots of funding for it to be completed.

Most of the GCN collection has already been processed into the Fales Library. However, prior to the start of this project, the six boxes that contain the original source material for GCN's programs had not been touched since it was acquired. These tapes are of tremendous research value as they contain raw footage without edits, voiceovers, or someone's opinion imposed upon them. For years, the tapes were stored in four drawers in a cabinet behind Maletta's desk and were almost left behind as after the archive was packed up and ready to be moved, Maletta mentioned there were more tapes in the cabinet. There was no climate control for the tapes as they were subjected to whatever room temperature and humidity were set in the office. These conditions are far from ideal as they can harm the tapes and allow them to deteriorate at a faster rate. Also, since they were discovered at the last minute, they were packed very quickly and in a rather disorganized fashion.

For my final project, I worked closely with Brent Phillips, the Media Specialist and Processing Archivist for Fales Library. He provided background information for the

collection as well as some helpful tips; however, the only directions given were to sort through the boxes, organize the tapes, and to separate any audio that might be mixed into the collection. Over the course of several weeks, I sorted the materials from the original six boxes and arranged them into nineteen archival storage containers. Each archival container contains approximately fifty tapes. The tapes, comprised of 8mm, Hi8, MiniDV's, VHS-C and S-VHS-C, were mixed together, along with some pieces of paper (Figure 2). In each box there was between approximately 150-200 items. Some items were bound together by rubber bands or in a cardboard box (Figures 4 and 5). Many of the tapes had a four digit unique Identifier from GCN; however, no corresponding database for the collection has been found. Also, some of the tapes had pink stickers on them, but again, there was no information to help explain the stickers or the order of the tapes.



Figure 1

Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Since the collection is just under a thousand items, it was difficult to decide how it should be organized. When beginning to sort through the tapes, there are a lot of factors to consider. I took into account several factors such as the formats, unique IDs, and the labeled content. The first step was trying to find matching tapes as many tapes were part of a series, but were often separated in other boxes. For example “Walt Whitman/Historical Society #1” or “Night of 1,000 Gowns #3.” When the labels indicated that a tape was part of a series, they were then placed into a separate archival container until their corresponding tapes were found. Next, the tapes were separated by format. Hi8 and 8mm were generally kept together, as were VHS-C and S-VHS-C (Figure 6). In some cases, a box would contain MiniDV's and VHS-C in order to fill the box. If tapes were bound together by a rubber band or a cardboard box, I would keep the tapes together, even if the reason they were together was not apparent. For example,

there might be a group of ten videos that all had different subjects and no common unique IDs. Also, when applicable, I placed the tapes in order of the unique IDs just in case a database with information for the unique IDs is later uncovered. Lastly, there were certain reoccurring subjects or keywords labeled on the tapes, such as St. Patrick's Day March, Pride Parade, Republican Convention, AIDS Walk, Wigstock, etc. When able, I placed the tapes with the same subject together so that when researchers look for certain topics, it will be easier to locate the items with similar material.



Figure 6: Hi8 and 8mm

There were several challenges while sorting through the boxes. Often there were loose papers with notes on them and I would try to match them with the tapes they belonged to. If the content on the paper did not match any of tapes, I would keep it with tapes that it was placed near in the box. Occasionally there were also pieces of paper or business cards found inside the containers (Figure 7). All of the materials were kept in the original containers along with any documentation that was included. Eventually, the tapes will be re-housed and give unique IDs from Fales, but the purpose of this project is to organize the collection to help ease into the next steps of the collection assessment.



Figure 7

Though a full visual inspection was not conducted, there were several key observations made about the condition of the tapes. Many of the containers had dust and/or dirt on them and in some cases the dirt made it difficult to read the labels. Also, several of the containers were broken and there were even a few tapes with no container at all. Despite the condition of the original containers, most of the tapes looked to be in good condition. Some tapes had some dirt or dust on them and in some cases what appeared to be paint splatter. The shell cases looked to be fine, but a few tapes had notes on them indicating that they were damaged. Another issue is deciphering the content of each tape. Most of the tapes are labeled, however there several with no labels at all. Some of the labels are hard to read, or are unknown abbreviations. Also, there are many tapes with conflicting information on them. Some things are crossed off or there are two labels with completely different information. The only way to be sure of what is on the tape is to play them, which may not always be an option. Lastly, another task that still

remains is figuring out the dates of when the footage was shot. Some tapes have a complete date, but most only have the month and day, or just the year. However, judging by the labeled tapes and the type of format, one can place the tape in a general time frame. Based on the videos that were labeled with the year, the majority of the VHS-C were from the 1990-1992, whereas most of the Hi8 and 8mm were from the mid to late 1990s. However, the MiniDVs were used from 1998 to 2001. The 973 tape collection is largely comprised of Hi8 video. MiniDVs, numbering 143, are the second most prevalent format in the collection. Overall, at first glance the tapes seem to be in fair condition, but they still require a full visual and playback inspections.

The GCN archive is an incredible resource for researchers and historians. The original source material is especially important as it is the raw footage capturing and documenting events throughout the LGBT movement during GCN's nineteen-year long broadcast. The wide array of content would appeal to many researchers and scholars, whether they are interested in LGBT history, politics, AIDS, etc. Now that the collection has been organized, it can then be assessed and preserved. This collection is especially relevant today, as the LGBT community is currently striving for their civil rights for freedom of marriage. It is essential for the collection to be preserved and made accessible, especially as these video formats are becoming obsolete. This collection is a true asset and will be able to help students and researchers learn first-hand about the LGBT movement.



Figure 12: The collection is now stored in nineteen archival storage containers.

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