

Final Report
MIAP Introduction to Preservation (Besser/Harris)
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In keeping with the case study style of the class projects we have completed this semester I have chosen to report on a discrete collection of 3/4" videotapes held by the Donnell Media Center, a branch of the New York Public Library. I intended to investigate their status on two levels: one by looking at their individual, inherent, primarily non commercial value; and two, to evaluate their physical condition, assessing whether or not they needed immediate reformatting, and if they could actually stand the reformatting process. On another level I would like to distinguish the contexts of original production of these tapes, briefly locating them historically in relation to the other historical moving image collection that Donnell owns, their 16mm film titles. By understanding the provenance of the work one can use this information to assess the importance of giving further preservation attention to these titles, while noting the possible attention being given to these titles in other collections, by other institutions.

1.0

Description of the collection

Background

The Donnell Media Center (DMC), as part of the New York Public Library (NYPL), has a collection of 3/4" videotapes which the Media Center began collecting in the mid to late 70s. They adjusted their accessioning to VHS when that format became the commercial norm and phased out collecting 3/4" video in the mid 80s. DMC owns public performance rights to the titles and the titles were originally drawn from for library sponsored programs. In addition, some of the tapes circulated while most could be viewed by appointment at the in-house study center. The collection is comprised of approximately 400 titles in the 3/4" format, though some exist only as the Sony Umatic-S format, or "mini" Umatic. The tapes in the collection are manufactured predominantly by Ampex, Sony and Scotch. There is usually only one copy of the title. The 3/4" titles are part of the reserve collection of videos, as are ten times as many 1/2" titles.

History effects content

The general content is varied but allows us to obtain a profile of the type of material that was being produced in non commercial sectors for small distribution companies or which was distributed independently by the creator or producer themselves. There are few commercial titles in this group as the library's main intent was to build a robust representation of the creative and critical production that would not be taken in at other types of institutions. However there was an array of types of material also being issued on the new 3/4" format by established

news networks, and film distribution companies and can be found in DMC's collection as well. Choices about whether to buy in a new format are effected by the types of titles being offered in that new format. With the 3/4" format the decision is relatively easy to buy new titles in video that were heretofore not available in film, but the idea of conservation of titles on a new format is also an issue to consider. In the late 70s and early 80s how did the newness of video and the availability of titles on this format effect collecting agencies' notion of conservation? Would it be better to buy in a new format the same title that the organization holds on film, or maintain the original format, as the industry allows, and conserve by buying another copy in film?

Explaining the 3/4" collection by charting what was being made in the new technological format is one way of explaining how the 3/4" titles complimented the existing material in the Media Center's overall collection. At the time, this existing material included approximately 3000 16mm titles, and an audio LP collection soon to be augmented by the 1/4" audio cassette. In many ways the independent video creators and producers continued in much the same vein as the 16mm creators and producers had a generation before. However the titles reflect a social update in issue driven documentaries and a technological update in the formal and textually experimental titles. DMC did play the conservation card in backing up certain titles in video that they had in the collection already on film, but the majority of 3/4" titles were new and completely unique from the 16mm titles. Now, at least 25 years later, this collection maintains its individual profile and content. It has not been disrupted, distributed, or weeded. It maintains its integrity as a collection capsule that is probably rare in its scope, size, and content, and distinct in comparison to similar regional or national collections. Within it is a history of exceptional years of production and an independent fervor for creating in a new format and medium. It is not the intent of this paper to go into the formal, material, and aesthetic differences between film and video, but suffice it to say that the collection--when taken in conjunction with the film titles--provides a rich and diverse comparative study of the cultural output of this country in the last 70 years.

Preservation and future use of the collection(s)

Given its distinctive qualities, how have the titles been preserved and maintained? This part of the story is just as complicated as the collection is unique. One must keep in mind the sheer number of titles that the Media Center maintains in both film and video. Roughly there are some 5,000 film titles and the same number in video. If the availability and condition half of each is in question then there are at least 5,000 titles to be dealt with in some way for conservation or preserving. Just as the 3/4" collection augments its sibling collection in 16mm, it must come second to the 16mm titles because of their age and medium. It is of note that as moving image preservation began to be accepted into the library culture, film was given priority attention. And for many cases rightly so. When institutions are faced with preserving the one of two moving image collections (in

this case film and video) it is logical to secure the older material before the available elements disappear. DMC was instrumental in film preservation endeavors, making use of their connections in the network of distributors and creators to convince their own administration and other similar collections of the need to cooperate in sharing knowledge of holdings, laboratory standards, preservation projects, and word on orphaned, de-accessioned collections. As these preservation efforts crystallized much of the money that came to DMC came for film, as opposed to video, preservation. Attempts were made in the late 90s to transfer to 1/2" VHS tape some 3/4" titles that merited immediate attention. Scraps of these records of which titles were at risk exist, however, at this writing, preservation for the video collection is still on the back burner.

Questions of how the 3/4" collection will be used, accessed, and attended to still remain. There is the need to identify all titles in the collection, their condition, and whether or not they are unique materials, or if--in the 20 years of VHS and the advent of DVD--some of the titles have become available commercially and could be updated in the new format. Even if not commercially available, it is also still important to assess how widely available any of the titles are in other institutions or organizations, be they museums or universities, to understand the second tier availability of titles should the need to share available elements become an issue. When and if preservation monies could be obtained for the video collection it is imperative to know or re-familiarize oneself with the 3/4" collection. As the Media Center is understaffed and overworked with its multiple charges¹ much of the staff's time and energy has been expended in pursuing film preservation grants, and establishing a proven and standardized track record. Video preservation has yet to be pursued full steam and hence the 3/4" collection needs revisiting.

Case Study Intent

It was my intent to re-establish the profile of the 3/4" collection so that all available information would be collected and organized in a single location (as currently records exist in various legacy catalogs, formats, and locations). It was agreed that though there could be no immediate attention to the 3/4" collection that there was the need for a renewed catalog of the titles that would show their status (both in their commercial availability and physical condition) for when the time and monies came to take preservation action on the 3/4" titles. Below I describe the procedures I established and undertook to start this renewed catalog of titles, and the recommendations for preservation that could be made

¹ In public libraries, circulation numbers, not preservation numbers curry favor with administration and maintain incoming budgets for print and non-print materials. Preservation monies are in no way budgeted to the Media Center and so they must go outside for grants. In terms of time, grant writing is also not budgeted to the Media Center. In that hierarchy, grant writing and processing collections for and after preservation is still valued behind or below collection development, cataloging, public reference work, and programming.

given the two factors of the physical condition of the tapes themselves and the administrative constraints within which DMC is operating.

2.0

Methodology

As the 3/4" collection is comprised of 400 titles, I chose to set a limit which, considering constraints of time for this work, would act as a control so that I would be able to perform the multiple stages in the assessment/inspection/cataloging process. I set the limit to 100 titles. By using these 100 I hoped I would get a sampling of condition and types of material. Also, by keeping a limit to the number of tapes I was more likely to fully complete the creation of the assessment model or template which could then be carried out by any other library staff who is familiar with the material or by someone who could familiarize themselves with it by reading this report. Given the time constraints at the Media Center on staff, it was important that I at least, after discussion with them, set up a model or template that they could fill in at their convenience, one that would settle on the basic universal information they would need to assess the collection in a way that would also allow them to interpret the results in a timely manner. The re-collecting of records on these titles and the need for and methodology behind the creation of a new database is explained later on.

Collection Inspection

The collection is currently non-circulating, and is housed in DMC's climate controlled storage room. They have been in this location for the last five years, but before that they were kept in various storage areas with less maintained dust and air quality control. However, the past temperature was kept relatively constant. The cases are all original, and vary from the hard to padded, and semi-padded constructions. DMC's designation procedures used a minimal amount of labeling on the tape itself. There is a bar code and a DMC identification label affixed to the tape. The practice was meant to keep as much of the original information on the tape face visible (handwritten or typed) as was possible. This information now proves to be very valuable and the foresight of this practice of minimal labeling is confirmed. The tapes were not re-housed into new cases so that any previous packing, shipping, or identification labels are still present. These labels are in various states of breakdown and sometimes their decomposition yields residues or particulate matter that should not be introduced into the inside of the case if can be helped. Some cases are cracked or split at the hinges. Part of the final recommendations is for re-housing of the 3/4" collection, but this should be sequenced so that all pertinent information on the cases is salvaged and recorded before the cases are discarded.

The condition of most of the tapes themselves is good to average. In the sampling I checked for irregularities in pack winds and for evidence of sticky shed and mold. The most common problem was with loose or occasionally stepped packs. I could not detect any sticky shed visually, although through when viewing there are some tapes with glitches which could be attributed to the shedding. I could find no mold however two titles did carry an odor which I was unable to place specifically as vinegar, though it is possible that the odor could've been related to the case or tape housing. One title I came across had a loose broken strand of tape hanging from the cassette.

Status of the records

At one point there existed a complete record of all 400 3/4" titles in the library's in-house catalog LEO, a DYNIX record management product. Over time however, throughout the mid 90s, all large majority of the 3/4" records dropped out of LEO. There is still some question as to how and why this occurred. It is believed that records of those titles that did not circulate were "cleaned" as part of a system wide pre-set procedure. It is unclear whether the title's status in the system (a title can be assigned a variety of statuses such as 'checked in', 'checked out', 'damaged', 'lost' and so on) effected it being dropped or cleaned. Media Center records do not show whether a directed collection wide status change took place for the 3/4" titles. Certain statuses would keep the record active even though it was non-circulating. It is also unclear as to whether these records actually still exist (it is possible they exist as 'dormant' records on the system) or whether they have been completely erased. Until this can be confirmed we still need to establish control over these titles.

Given the need to assess the titles, and the lack of their complete record, the ability to regain and order this information is paramount. Using the still extant LEO records as a benchmark I set about to create a database that would be the updated collection catalog for the 3/4" titles. Tracking back through alternate, print resources that the Library had generated also helped to reconstruct the profile of these titles. These alternate, print resources included a book version of the catalog and purchase orders. The book version included records for a large part of the 3/4" titles. It didn't include all titles because at the time of its printing DMC was still collecting 3/4" material. In addition to the book catalog, are the purchase orders for each title. When a title was ordered, a purchase order was made as the individual record of that sale. The purchase order includes information on such as the title, the running time, the date, the format, the price paid, and the individual or distributor selling the title.

The only master list I had was a printout of all 3/4" titles from a 15 year old Mac computer, that DMC specifically kept for certain files which they could not migrate to the newer PCs. This file list was invaluable as a start. Although it did not provide a deep record for each individual title, it was to the best of everyone's knowledge complete in all titles. The only problem with this list was that it didn't

distinguish clearly between creator and distributor, so that one could not be sure if certain titles were self-distributed (as many were) or if the distributing company was also the producer. The purchase orders often helped to determine the difference in these cases.

We decided to keep the scope of the new database as wide as possible at first, to gather as much information as we could at the same time and go through the collection ideally only once. With Media Center staff I discussed how many fields we wanted to collect information in, and what areas of information would be useful, to simultaneously track the history of the tape and provide data so that in questions of preservation qualities or quantities could be isolated and considered. In this building of the database we consulted other similar systems, including the IMAP template, and the variations being developed by departments in Bobst library.

Description of the fields

I drew up a list of 23 fields, and refined their meaning and what would be eligible data in each of them. The issue of names became the first problem. As some of these tapes were done in collectives and in non-traditional cooperatives we wanted the fields to be able to reflect this. I settled on "Videographer's name" to determine the director or artistic agency producing the work. I left a general field for "Other Credits" to be a catch-all for other important names of participants. These fields are to be separate from the distributor, for which we have two fields: one for the original, and one for the current, to allow for the fact that distribution houses change and evolve. As much as I want to gather the original historic information on these tapes, I want the database to be robust enough to encompass current data as well, so that one can see how a collection changes. As much of these productions depict unique regional cultural, social, and political qualities I wanted the original production location and dates to be included and available as well. Format and running time are self explanatory. The tape manufacturer I included because certain years and brands of tape are known to suffer from particular ailments pertaining to their tape compositions. The next group of fields is to help determine the tape's history within the Library, as tracking an item's existence and condition can be made difficult when there are multiple volumes, copies, or if as sometimes is the case, the same title can be procured from different distributors. All items regardless of extent or copies should only have one designating DMC number, which I am calling here "shelf number". The 3/4" titles are part of the reserve collection of videos, as are ten times as many 1/2" titles. To distinguish between the formats the LEO catalog number is different for each of them. For the 3/4" titles, videos are assigned a VTU number, for the 1/2" titles, videos are assigned a VTH number. Furthermore, some 3/4" titles were purchased in 1/2" format later on. The fields need to reflect all iterations of a title in the collection. In some cases a title might also exist in the regular circulating Open Access collection, in addition to being present as a 3/4'

or 1/2" title in the Reserve Collection. As some of these records have been dropped from the LEO catalog we need to know which ones exist and which ones don't, and include this in the database. Whether the title is currently available is also important, as this might allow for conservation through repurchasing in another format. As I wanted a complete profile of the title, I included fields for content description. Here one could log as much narrative about the title as they wish, or if there is descriptive information from the distributor it can be included here. The idea of introducing key words for a search was brought up. At the least I decided there should be one subject descriptor for this field, though there can be longer content. The subject headings are meant to be broader rather than very specific, as at this point we can foresee assessing the collection from a general standpoint first to see what types of work it includes. And we do have a general idea of what type of work is not included in the 3/4" collection as explained previously. Later more determined subject headings could be introduced if need be. The ones we settled on for now are: *Experimental, Documentary, Educational, and Alternative Media*. By using the *Alternative Media* designation we chose to highlight the work of an important pioneering generation of independent media outlets such as Downtown Community Television or Blue Heron Films and Tapes and the type of work they were doing which could be partially considered as documentary but which we felt assessed a cultural, political or social issue in a unique approach, that is more engaged than the straight form of traditional documentary. Next, it is important to know the condition of each tape. Therefore I created a field to record the quality for the physical tape as well as its signal as shown on the monitor as there can be a link between the housing and the tape itself. Damage to one or the other could conceivably effect the playback signal and picture. As some of the titles were partially viewed within the last 8 years in an attempted in-house dubbing project, some condition notes remain from those viewings. These are currently written out and need to be collected and matched to their respective titles digitally. So there is a field for previous notes as well as contemporary new notes, again to help distinguish the actions taken on a tape, or stages the tape might have gone through. There is no record of a cleaning done to the tapes, though if this is found in the notes it will be included. For most of the fields I included a guide for input which describes what is eligible data for each specific field. This is an attempt to commonly define, control, and standardize what information we are looking to collect, knowing why and what we will have to extract.

3. Recommendations

Though the assessment project is not completed, when used, the established base for assessment can yield a good quantity of quality information from which to judge the immediate preservation needs of titles. The database was built in

such a way that by looking at certain factors of a title, titles can be prioritized by their availability and physical condition.

Best Case Scenario

The best case scenario would be that the data entry would be completed in full in one pass. This would admittedly require a large amount of discrete devoted time. One could then rank the titles and determine what titles are duplicates with the rest of the collection, which titles are commercially available, which titles are available via other institutions, and which titles are completely unique. Of these completely unique titles, one could further rank those needing immediate preservation and those which could be stabilized given no playing in a deck and continued cool storage. This prioritizing would help the Media Center to distribute its budget and have an idea of what amount of monies it would need to seek grants for in order to undertake video preservation work. The best case scenario would include the completion of preservation work and re-installment into the collection of viewing copies as well as master tapes of the unique titles.

The Next Best Thing

The medium range scenario would call for completion and assessment of the database, which would yield the list of most endangered tapes, waiting for the time and money to do preservation work.

The Bare Minimum

The very minimum scenario should at least be completion of the database, with the assessment of the titles and compilation of the endangered list pending.