

Access Comparisons:
Paley Center for Media vs. the National Film Archive in Prague

While all libraries and archives serve their publics in various ways, three points of access are critical regardless of the institution: physical, virtual, and intellectual. To compare these three points, I chose the Paley Center for Media and the National Film Archive in Prague and was both surprised and disappointed to find that even long-standing archives have not yet realized the importance of virtual access in modern society.

The Paley Center for Media, with locations in both New York City and Los Angeles, is a media archive with a particular focus on television and radio. Currently, they have over 140,000 pieces of media in their vaults. Many of their artifacts are one-of-a-kind pieces of early television and radio history that had previously been thought to be lost. Aside from its extensive archive, the institution hosts a variety of events. Often the center invites special guests to screenings of different television episodes. Sometimes the center encourages audience participation to foster discussion on the various mediums.

My first exposure to the Paley Center was through their website. Potential visitors can quickly locate information about fees, locations, hours, and directions. Emails are provided if visitors or researchers want to make an appointment to visit the collection; however, an appointment isn't necessarily required.

For the researcher, the best feature of this website is that the entire catalogue can be accessed online. The relatively simple search tool will look up keywords, which can be further divided into their media type (for example, television versus television advertising). If more specific information is needed, then instead of using a keyword, a viewer can search using title, person, summary, date, and network. Once the search

brings up a seeker's results, the catalogue entries vary in their usefulness. Some entries have a number of categories filled out including name, date, running time, and genre. Other entries simply have a catalogue number and blank spaces for the missing categories. None of the pieces of the collection itself can be viewed online for reasons that were not specified, but recordings of all events at the center could be watched in full. Not all information is at your fingertips, per se, but enough is available to allow one to make a decision whether or not to visit the center or inquire further on particular holdings.

I visited the Paley Center on a weekday. The entrance fee was quite reasonable, \$15 for students or \$25 for all other visitors, and the printed program given upon entrance has the same basic information found on the website. The entrance fee allows you access to a floor devoted to visitor viewing stations. A staff member greeted me the moment I exited an elevator and demonstrated how to use the catalogue and viewing stations. During my time in the room, I noticed that all staff members treated visitors with the same attentive attitude. The room holds a number of large computer screens and comfortable chairs. As there is no limit to search time, a visitor could spend an entire day browsing through the archives. If one would like to view screenings with a companion, the institution created stations built for two. All stations have ample desk room. Overall, it was a very comfortable and welcoming environment.

In addition, the catalogue at the institution itself is much more detailed than the one online. Curator collections and popular hits by genre as well as new and rare acquisitions are featured on the first page, orienting the casual viewer toward a wide variety of programs and topics. Searching for something specific was an extension of the

online cataloguing system. However, these entries on site were much more detailed. About a quarter to a third of what I searched was available to fully view at my station. These access copies were in wonderful condition. Some pieces required further information, and staff informed me that whatever was not yet transferred online was (except for a few pieces) in their archive vaults. These are located on the premises itself. If a visitor would like to watch any of these programs, a request is made and the program delivered manually to the viewing room within ten to thirty minutes. The system was very efficient, and I was surprised at how smoothly everything went.

In contrast, the National Film Archive in Prague focuses on Czech cinema as well as materials focusing on Czech history. It houses over one hundred and fifty meters (approximately four hundred and fifty million feet) of film reels, six hundred thousand photographs, thirty thousand posters, and one hundred thousand pieces of advertising material, the earliest of which dates to 1898. It is a governmental academic institution and, as such, operates under government regulation.

Virtual access to this institution is found through an online website that is conveniently available both in Czech and in English. Unfortunately, the website is complicated and, at least in the English portions, suffers from a number of serious grammatical errors that make understanding the presented information difficult. The exception to this is contact information, which is easily accessed for further inquiries.

According to this institution's website, the archive has strict rules regarding access. Only paper materials allow public access, though eighty-five percent of these materials are stored outside Prague and must be ordered by request. Accessing moving image materials is far more difficult. Orders are submitted through a lengthy email

process. Interested parties must specify what materials they require and explain, in detail, the reasons for these retrievals. From this, the archive may choose whether or not to search for the materials. Even if an item is not located, the interested party is charged for time spent searching. From there, the interested party may view an item either at the center in DVD form, or, if only a film copy is available, the party may pay additional fees to hire a projectionist. This convoluted process scares off all but the most resolute academics and film enthusiasts.

For further research, a catalogue is available through the National Film Archive's website. Entries are sorted by a number of keywords in a basic search system. Those entries that have been placed in the online catalogue are mostly detailed and annotated. Small selections of these entries are available both in Czech and English with a large percentage of the entries only available in Czech. However, the main issue with this catalogue is its limited search capabilities. Though millions of items reside in this archive, only about one hundred and fifty thousand items have been catalogued for the outside researcher. The website suggests that more information can be found at the archive itself and that the online catalogue is limited due to European copyright law. Short of visiting the actual institution, I have no way to verify this information.

Because I cannot take a personal trip to the National Film Archive in Prague, I have no way to compare the physical accesses of the institution and the Paley Center for Media. Both claim to have impressive and substantial collections of materials that would often be ignored by more mainstream or traditional film archives. Intellectual accesses for both institutions, as found through their websites, are limited to varying degrees. Not all materials can be searched thoroughly. Emails and phone numbers are provided, but

many researchers might not go through the trouble of contacting an archivist for the information they require. Many researchers require an extensive online catalogue, but sadly, both institutions lack this.

These two institutions differ dramatically in the aspect of virtual access. The Paley Center's online presence allows visitors and researchers the ability to have a strong understanding of how the institution functions. The site is inviting and beckons the viewer to visit the institution itself. The National Film Archive in Prague has not wholly realized the potential of online access, yet. If it has, it has decided it isn't important. The website is difficult, ponderous, and often boring. A casual viewer would not choose, most likely, to visit this institution based on its website, which is a shame considering the vast collection that the institution has to offer.

Both the Paley Center for Media and National Film Archive in Prague have their strengths and weaknesses. From a casual comparison, I would say that the Paley Center is the more accessible of the two institutions, and I hope that institutions like the National Film Archive in Prague will take the Paley Center's strong online presence as an example of how to benefit their own collections.