

Carmel Curtis
September 30, 2014
Access to Moving Image Collections

As we live in an age of Twitter, Google and Netflix, access is something that we feel more and more entitled to. We want what we want how we want and we want it now. But what does access look like? What tools are in existence that enable or restrict our access to information? This paper will look at the access policies and approaches of two moving image collections, that of the Brooklyn Public Library and that of the Harvard Film Archive. In comparing the physical, virtual, and intellectual roads around access, this paper will also consider the functionality of a public library and a university archive.

Brooklyn Public Library

“It is the mission of Brooklyn Public Library to ensure the preservation and transmission of society's knowledge, history and culture, and to provide the people of Brooklyn with free and open access to information for education, recreation and reference.”¹

Visiting the Central Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL), one is struck by the overwhelming beauty of the building. The large open courtyard and golden doorways are a summoning to the public to enter. Upon passage through the gateway however, one quickly loses a sense of invitation due to the incomplete, inaccurate, and inconsistent maps/ directories. Locating the Art & Music division can only be accomplished by a printed out Floor Plan available at the front desk. Entering the Art & Music division on the third floor, it was clear that the collection consisted exclusively of paper materials. The librarian looked at my printed Floor Plan and directed me to the Popular Library division on the second floor. The Popular Library contained exclusively DVDs. I approached the librarian to inquire about the extent of the collection. I asked if the library had any formats of moving images other than DVDs. The librarian did not understand my question. “Do you have any VHSs?” I asked. I was then informed that they do indeed have VHSs that are being stored in the basement. If I provided a call number, a librarian would be happy to retrieve the video for me. He

¹ “Mission and Vision.” Bklyn Public Library. Brooklyn Public Library, n.d. Web. 28 Sep 2013.

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explained that they relocated their collection to the basement in order to increase space for DVDs and that I could neither browse the VHS collection nor inspect the conditions of their storage facilities. In the back of the Popular Library was a small room labeled Popular Library Study Center. However, in this room there was no equipment for viewing DVDs or VHSs.

In an increasingly digital age, the way in which we access libraries is changing. Access to materials is no longer limited to a library's physical space. "The librarian of the future is likely to be less concerned with managing an in-house collection, and more concerned with providing access to a variety of services across a network. This will be a fundamental shift in the role of the librarian."² The BPL has taken significant steps to allow those with a library card the ability to view materials on the Internet. However, these efforts fall short in reference to their moving image collection. Similar to the inviting exterior of the BPL, their website at first glance seems clear. With clickable tabs for popular queries such as obtaining a library card, donating money, or asking a librarian a question, one would think they would shortly be able to obtain the information needed. Under a tab labeled E-Books and More, there is a link to "Downloadable Media from Overdrive." A description listed under this heading reads: "Collection of downloadable eBooks, audiobooks, music, and video. Titles can be read or played on tablets, e-readers, laptops, PCs, mp3 players, and smartphones." However, when looking at the advanced search in this collection, there are no format options for audio and visual materials. Despite the description that claims access to video, the formats are exclusively related to text related items.

It is only in the digital catalog of the BPL, where one is able to search for materials that can be accessed virtually. Their digital catalog was in many ways the most conducive tool to enabling access. An advanced search allows one to search moving images by format (DVD, Video Cassette, or

² Besser, Howard. "Future Trends in Library Video & Film Collections" in *Video Collection Management & Development*. Gary Handman, ed. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994.

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Downloadable Video). The controlled vocabulary of the field options encourages desired results. When a search is conducted, information on the item is provided that displays a thumbnail image, title, format, date, and availability. Once the title is clicked on, a more detailed description of content is visible. In addition to the descriptive information provided by the BPL catalog, there are fields inviting users to enter and share their own notes under categories such as notes, age, quotes, and summary. This crowd-sourcing technique allows users to participate and contribute to the metadata of the online catalog.

Overall, the physical space of the Central Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library was not conducive to “free and open access” of their moving image collection. The location of the materials in the difficult to locate and poorly labeled Popular Library as well as the lack of viewing equipment in the Study Center seemed to emphasize use of the materials for recreation as opposed to education and reference. Patrons are encouraged to view their materials at home as opposed to on-site. The entirety of the collection was not made visible with VHSs located in the basement, thus making their access more directed towards searching as opposed to browsing. The widest road of access to the moving image collection at the BPL was in their online catalog. It was only through the controlled query that I was able to find the downloadable videos. The online catalog supports the idea that access to a public library no longer necessarily taking place *at* the public library.

Harvard Film Archive

The Harvard Film Archive (HFA) is located in Cambridge, MA as a division of Harvard University Library. It is home to about 25,000 items most of which are 35mm and 16mm. While it a subset of the Harvard University Library, it functions as an archive, with a mission not to serve the general public but to support “the research and study of cinema at Harvard by making films from its collection available for study purposes, for individual viewing appointments, and for classroom

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screenings.”³ The physical space of the archive is limited to those who make an appointment via email explaining why the materials needed are necessary to your research. Once a staff member reviews and approves your inquiry, you will set up a time to individually view the film on-site no less than ten business days after the initial email. None of the materials in the HFA are available for circulation. Copying materials is forbidden. This includes the use of scanners, cameras, and recorders. Appointments have to be made during the hours of Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Additionally, a service fee (\$25/hour for non-Harvard students, \$15/hour for Harvard students) is required at the end of your viewing session. The procedure for physical access to the HFA is intentionally restrictive. This space is intended to be used for scholarly research as opposed to entertainment and recreation. The requirement of explaining your research project and the fee of up to \$25/hour are in place to ensure the limited access to their collections. While this may protect the materials, it closes the door on those who are not scholars, cannot afford \$25/hour, or are unable to visit the facilities Monday through Friday 10 to 5.

On the website of the HFA, one can click on a tab clearly labeled Collections. However, this page does not give an itemized listing of the materials in each collection. Instead, it lists the name of each of their specific collections and with another click, researchers can read a brief description of the history of how this collection came to be located at Harvard. There is limited information on what films each collection is comprised of. One can access the Harvard University Library online database, Hollis, and search the listings limited to the Harvard Film Archive. However, not all of the holdings are documented and the information provided is limited. The assumption is that researchers will engage in a conversation with HFA staff about his/her area of study instead of handing the staff a call number.

None of the materials from the HFA are viewable online. On their website, a tab for Access, clearly explains their policies on obtaining materials in their physical location. Immediate access is not

³ Harvard Film Archive. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2013. Web. 28 Sep 2013.

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their priority. They do work to ensure that the materials in their collection are accessible by someone not only ten days after a request is submitted, but for years to come. By limiting the interaction that the public has to the works, the HFA is working to prolong access into the future. As an archive affiliated with a prestigious private university, they are upholding the mission not only of their archive, but also of Harvard itself. By limiting access to the public, they are in affect controlling who it is that studies cinema.

Conclusion

The ways in which the Brooklyn Public Library and the Harvard Film Archive approach access to their moving image collections, speaks to the intended audience and usage of both of their materials. Access to moving images in the BPL is focused towards recreational home viewership. With a relatively small collection in the Popular Library division, DVDs can be borrowed and returned in a fashion similar to a video rental store. Discrimination is limited to those who are simply in possession of a free Brooklyn Library Card. On the contrary, the Harvard Film Archive is focused towards academic research and preservation of the medium of film. As an archive connected to Harvard University, users must conform to the restrictive requirements of the privileged intellectual elite. If you have a Monday through Friday nine to five job, you will not be able to use materials at HFA. This difference speaks not only to the policies of BPL and HFA but to the nature of a public library and a private archive and who is approaching these institutions. Approaches to access are determined not only by the nature of the materials but also by the nature of who desires access. As we survey institutions' roads to access, we must take a step further and look at the demographics of the people who this is affecting. For without people to access the materials, is there a point in enabling access in the first place? This author believes not.

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