

Presentation of Information: A comparison of the collections of The Paley Center for Media and the American Museum of Natural History

Class: Access to Moving Image Collections

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“The broader mission of the library is to build and maintain broad standing collections of materials that are responsive to the changing needs of teaching and scholarship over long periods of time.”¹

In drawing any comparison between libraries and archives, the differences between the two chosen institutions, their respective collections and missions, are paramount to defining the differences in access that separate them. As such, two research centres could hardly be more different than The Paley Center for Media and the Research Library of the American Museum of Natural History. While both libraries provide a wealth of materials within their specific academic ranges, they differ hugely in how that material can be accessed. However, both subscribe to the goal addressed by Gary Handman in the quote above, albeit in very different ways.

The Paley Center, located in New York’s Midtown at 25 West 52nd Street (with another branch in Beverly Hills, California), has a collection of some 150,000 television and radio programmes and advertisements, mostly from the USA, although with some international materials (staff on site specified the collection was limited to “Western” media). These are largely available in a digitised format, and can be viewed at the Center only, with some materials still only accessible on VHS, by request. The Center is accessible only to paid-up members or guests on a pay-per-visit basis.

By comparison, the Research Library of the American Museum of Natural History (henceforth AMNH), located at Central Park West in Manhattan, is free to all. It houses some 550,000 volumes of books, pamphlets, slides and moving image materials relating to natural history subjects. While it is open to the general public, its opening hours are brief (2pm to 5.30pm, Tuesdays to Thursdays), and its special collections (which includes all of its moving image collections) are only accessible upon prior request submitted via email.

The Paley Center's archive is searchable via its website, www.paleycenter.org. The online search engine allows for searches of its TV and radio programmes separately, while providing specified searches of show titles, persons, summary, date of broadcast and network or country of origin. While everything in the collection is searchable online, the website search does not specify whether programmes in the collection are available at the viewing stations or on VHS, an issue that could cause issues for casual researchers, as we shall see below. The system on site has a far more advanced and in-depth search engine, which also allows for searches by accession number and genre, while providing options for the use of Boolean operators to help clarify searches.

In addition to the search engine, the viewing stations offer excellent methods for browsing the collection. These include special collections ('9/11 Collection', 'Vietnam War', 'Johnny Carson' and 'She Made It', a celebration of women in television) and curator's choices, which provide a selection of the best works in the collection in the opinions of four of the Center's curators, who talk viewers through their selections via pre-recorded talks and animated avatars, offering detailed accounts of each selection.

Curator Rebecca Paller recommended the 1960 television musical special *Peter Pan* (Vincent J. Donehue, 1960), providing in-depth historical and critical study of the broadcast. The metadata attached to the entry for *Peter Pan* is extensive, detailing everything from cast and crew to network and time slot, to awards and commercial interruptions. While the programmes can be viewed at full screen, viewing them in a reduced window allows the metadata to be checked while a show is running. In addition, a scrollable selection of still images from throughout a programme is offered at the right-hand side of the screen, which act as extremely specific chapter selections so that a researcher can quickly find the specific sequence s/he is looking for.

Metadata is not as detailed for every production, however, and indeed can be of inconsistent quality between individual episodes of the one show. A search of episodes of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) revealed that earlier episodes of the series had considerably more metadata than later episode. 'He Is Risen' (Season 3, Episode 8, Allen Coulter, 2001) provided considerable detail of cast and crew, while 'Cold Cuts' (Season 5, Episode 10, Mike Figgis, 2004), incorrectly labelled in the system as 'The Cold Cuts', listed only the show's lead star James Gandolfini and not one other person involved in the episode's production.

While certain programmes in the collection were noted as having errors or even being "incomplete"², others were found to only be available on VHS. The VHS collections, which can be requested from an archive at the Center and viewed at special booths, are not accessible to non-members, meaning paying visitors may not view them. A 90-minute visitor's pass to The Paley Center is \$8, meaning a visitor could find a programme via the website and pay to access the collection only to find the item in question is only available on VHS to members –

a major flaw in the Center's accessibility. Membership is \$70 for individuals, with a discounted rate of \$50 for seniors and students.

Staff at the Center are extremely helpful and offer detailed tutorials for searching their catalogue. However, no printed resources are available, and the only documentation found on-site was membership application details and an events schedule.

With a considerably less attractive interface, the website of the Research Library of the AMNH (<http://www.amnh.org/our-research/research-library>) provides users with a satisfactory search engine. While it does not allow for searches of the text within its written materials, its keyword system can access detailed summaries for entries in the catalogue. Specific years of publication can be searched, as can format, which includes a search of the 291 items in the Library's Moving Image Collection. Metadata on entries is finely detailed, when it is available at all – a search of the Moving Image Collection revealed as many as 70 titles lacked entries beyond their name and accession number. An emailed enquiry to the Library (which was responded to within 2 hours) revealed that the formats are currently being changed. Original 16mm and 35mm prints in the collection had been transferred to U-matic tape for access purposes, but the collection is now in the process of being digitised. The librarian clarified that tapes and digital copies could be viewed on site and should not require the scheduling of an appointment, despite being in the Special Collections, while in certain cases digital files could be emailed to researchers in lower quality copies for study.

“The technological advancements that have been leveraged thus far to improve scholarly access to media were developed for the consumer market and

appropriated for use in academia,”³ write Geisler, Willard and Whitworth, and at few places is this more evident than at The Paley Center, with its mostly digitised archive as easy to use as a DVD played through a desktop computer. The AMNH has been slow to catch up and make its Moving Image Collection as easily accessible digitally, but it has the potential to make its materials available online and access to is free to all. Its Moving Image Collection is a small subsidiary of its collection as a whole, but an important one nevertheless. It is the technology on display at The Paley Center that really sets it apart from other archives and libraries, allowing easy access to the majority of its collection in an extraordinarily user-friendly form.

Bibliography

Geisler, Gary; Willard, Geoff; and Whitworth, Eryn, 'Crowdsourcing the Indexing of Film and Television Media'; ASIST 2010

Handman, Gary, 'License to Look: Evolving Models for Library Video Acquisition and Access' in *Library Trends*, Volume 58, Number 3, Winter 2010

Endnotes

¹ Handman, Gary, 'License to Look: Evolving Models for Library Video Acquisition and Access' in *Library Trends*, Volume 58, Number 3, Winter 2010, p.329

² The *Fawlty Towers* episode 'Basil the Rat' (Season 2, Episode 6, Bob Spiers, 1979) was found to switch off a few minutes before its end.

³ Geisler, Gary; Willard, Geoff; and Whitworth, Eryn, 'Crowdsourcing the Indexing of Film and Television Media'; ASIST 2010; p.1