

MODULE 21

**LIGHTS, CAMERA,
ARCHIVES!**

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archivist recounts, “I was surprised, but able to answer that question based off of two things: the extra research I did, and the fact that I read an article about the other exhibit the day before. My tip: set up a Google Alert to track other postings about similar exhibits so that you are not surprised on the day of your interview.”

- Remember your audience. When the local CBS station contacted the Independence Seaport Museum about the exhibit, they did not need the technical details of the *Titanic* sinking; they wanted to know heart-wrenching facts that would connect with viewers. The news radio station wanted that too, but they also needed extra descriptive information because their radio listeners, and most of their audience, could not see images of the items the museum had on display. It is helpful to think about your audience before the day of a media event so that there are fewer surprises.
- Build in time for media to visit the exhibit or items. The exhibit designers and archivist at the Independence Seaport Museum added an extra two days to the exhibit planning phase to ensure that any last-minute problems could be fixed. If they had not, media crews would have filmed the exhibit with half of the graphics and photo wall cut to the incorrect scale.

Overall, working with the media is a trying process that requires patience, understanding, and a good deal of work ahead of time. As the Independence Seaport Museum’s archivist says: “Believe me, I have talked for hours about an exhibit focusing on death and despair, which others seemed to enjoy, but it has been a rewarding part of my journey as an archivist.”

“The Special Collections Equivalent of a Stampede at a Rock Concert”

By Daniel J. Linke

The title of this case study is a phrase I uttered at the end of an interview about a T. S. Eliot collection that was about to be opened.²² The

²² *Emily Hale Letters from T. S. Eliot*, Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library. A finding aid for this material is available online at <https://findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/C0686>, captured at <https://perma.cc/7YJX-4BHS>.

backstory is that Eliot, a poet and Nobel laureate, did not have a straightforward marriage, as his wife suffered from mental illness and was ultimately institutionalized. In time, Eliot began corresponding with Emily Hale, whom he had befriended while in graduate school. The two had a decades-long, intimate epistolary relationship, but after Eliot's wife's death, he ultimately decided to marry someone else. When Hale donated over 1,100 letters that she had received from Eliot to the Princeton University Library in 1956, she stipulated that they be closed for fifty years following her death or his, whichever was later.

Fast forward to December 2019, when the letters were set to open in less than a month. Interest from scholars and the media had been building for months. Working with the Library's Communication Office, the Special Collections department had issued a press kit, but when an AP reporter called the Communications Office with additional questions, they referred the journalist to me, the interim head of the department.

The call lasted for about fifteen minutes, and much of what the reporter asked related to a blog post²³ or to the press kit. Toward the end of the conversation, she asked, "You're expecting a crush of people, aren't you?" I thought "crush" was a strong word and responded that it was not going to be like a stampede at a rock concert. I informed her that while it was not unusual for two different researchers to look at the same collection at the same time, we knew that there were at least five people who were planning to be at our door at 9:00 a.m. on the day that the collection opened: Thursday, January 2, 2020. I also said that there were likely others who had not informed us that they were coming because we did not require advance notice, so we expected it to be busy.

I then concluded by saying, "It will be the special collections equivalent of a stampede at a rock concert." That, of course, is the only line she used.²⁴

23 Don Skemer, "Sealed Treasure: T. S. Eliot Letters to Emily Hale," last modified May 16, 2017, <https://blogs.princeton.edu/manuscripts/2017/05/16/sealed-treasure-t-s-eliot-letters-to-emily-hale>, captured at <https://perma.cc/7AV5-QBUW>.

24 Caroline Davies, "TS Eliot's Intimate Letters to Confidante Unveiled after 60 Years," *The Guardian*, January 1, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jan/01/ts-eliot-intimate-letters-to-confidante-emily-hale-unveiled-after-60-years?CMP=share_btn_tw.