

# How do Small Archives Steward their Moving Image and Sound Collections? A Qualitative Study

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## Moving Image and Sound Collections for Archivists

ANTHONY COCCIOLO

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"Written specifically for archivists who find themselves frustrated by pesky audiovisual recordings that are found in mixed collections, this book is impressively comprehensive, covering everything from accessioning to access, with media-specific guidance. It's essential reading for seasoned archivists and archival students alike."

—KARA VAN MALSEN, *Partner and Senior Consultant, AVPreserve*

"Cocciolo provides valuable interpretations of concepts such as appraisal and description for audiovisual collections, often leavening best practice with a dose of common sense that will be particularly helpful for archivists in environments where resources for description, digitization, and storage are scarce."

—KAREN F. GRACY, *PhD, Associate Professor, School of Information, Kent State University*

"This book gives concise guidance that supports collections work at a technical level that is sufficient to work with the media without being overwhelming. An important convergence of library and archival science and technological know-how that will help you venture beyond VHS."

—JOSHUA RANGER, *Public Records Officer, Video Production Unit, New York Police Department*

"As a starting point for archivists working with the incredible range of moving image and sound materials found in collections today, you couldn't ask for better. Readers will come away feeling informed and empowered . . . Cocciolo's book should have a place on the shelves of archivists who want to provide the very best care for their collections—which is to say, every archivist."

—SNOWDEN BECKER, *Program Manager, Moving Image Archive Studies, University of California, Los Angeles*



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# Research Questions

- How do non-audiovisual specific archives, especially those run by lone arrangers or small staffs, address their audiovisual collections?
- Specifically, what formats do they steward, how is format obsolescence and migration addressed, and how is long-term preservation attended to?

# Research Method

- Interview subjects were sought after via SAA's lone arranger listserv in November and December 2016.
- Interviews were conducted over the telephone and detailed notes were taken.
- The characteristics of the interview subjects include:
  - one lone arranger for a religious organization in Oceania,
  - one archive for performing arts non-profit in the Midwest,
  - two archivists for small college archives in the New England and the Mid-Atlantic, and
  - one archivist for a private college preparatory school in the Southwest.

# Snapshots from the interviews – mature processes

- Subject characteristics: archivist for small college archives in the New England which has a strong focus on media, film and video. Work timeframe was 2007–2016.
- Large quantities of audiovisual items. There was not playback equipment for all media types, and she did not necessarily want to obtain play back some of the older media, recognizing that effort was better spent in reformatting them to digital formats for preservation and access.
- A system was developed of digitizing or migrating media on demand by hand-delivering it to a local digitization vendor; the returned digitized files would be stored on an IT server. Patrons would access the digitized files however they needed them, such as through the web, USB flash drive, or optical disk

# Inventory

- Experiences with digitization on demand led archivist to look more closely at her audiovisual collections.
- This led her to hire an intern to do an initial assessment of what audiovisual items were present and where they were stored.
- This assessment was used to inform the development of a Preservation Assistance Grant for Smaller Institutions from the National Endowment for the Arts that would permit the archives to hire AVPreserve—a consulting company with expertise with audiovisual materials based in Brooklyn, NY—to perform a full assessment
- Expected AVPreserve to find about 5,000 to 5,500 audiovisual items; however, the tally was closer to 10,000 items in nearly all possible media formats, including U-matic, VHS, open-reel audio and video, 16 mm and 35 mm film, Blu-ray, DAT, Betacam, Betamax, and Digibeta, among other formats. She notes that “any format from the last fifty years we had at least one instance of. We did not know that we had such variety. We had a lot more of it than we thought we did.”

# Proactive digitization

- A more proactive digitization approach than digitization on demand permitted.
- She decided to reallocate funds from an unused budget line to reformat media each year. She also used unspent funds left in the department's budget at the end of the fiscal year to reformat media.
- When moving from digitization on demand alone to proactive digitization, the archives needed to make its own selection decisions.

# Selection criteria

- Criteria were developed that prioritized items that had both high research value and rare formats over items that had low research value and were in fairly common formats.
- For example, some open-reel video as well as some DAT tapes were identified as having high research value and were recognized as endangered formats and thus were sent off for digitization.
- Media on VHS, which was fairly inexpensive and easy to digitize, was generally deprioritized unless it was of high research value.
- Any commercial works under copyright, such as those that could still be purchased, were deprioritized as well.



# Vendors

- As part of its final report, AVPreserve provided digitization pricing information and a vendor list, including George Blood LP in Philadelphia and MediaPreserve in the greater Pittsburgh area. These vendors were especially useful for digitizing more obscure formats.
- For formats that were relatively easy and inexpensive to digitize, such as VHS or U-matic tapes, she could continue to use the local vendor.

# Digital Preservation

- Once digitized masters were created, they were stored on a hosted digital preservation platform called Preservica.
- Via Preservica, the plan is to store preservation master files in Amazon's Glacier service, which is effectively "dark storage" where files cannot be quickly pulled up, and to store access files in Amazon's S3 service, where files can be quickly pulled up over the web.
- By 2016, the plan was to store approximately 25–30 TB of preservation masters in Amazon's Glacier and 2 TB of access copies on S3 via Preservica.

# Snapshots from the interviews – emerging processes

- Private school founded at the turn of the last century in a city in the Southwest United States.
- Archives founded in 2000s
- Audiovisual collections were inadequately arranged and described, and archivist began an audiovisual project with the first phase dedicated to creating an inventory of media in the archives
- FileMaker Pro database—intending it to only be temporary—with the following information fields: title, date, year, type of content, creating department, description, media format, housing type, digitized (Y/N), digital format, location, and accession number.
- She also noted preservation issues such as mold, mildew, or an active state of decay such as vinegar syndrome

# Inventory results

- She found that there were at least four hundred unique items and sets of duplicate items, including reel-to-reel audio, 8 mm film, Super 8 film, compact audiocassette, VHS, CD, DVD, Hi-8 video, and DAT audiocassette.
- During the inventory process, she was able to weed non-archival teaching materials, such as Hollywood or educational films.

# Arrangement & Reformatting

- Sets of materials spread across multiple containers have been intellectually reunited and will be physically reunited during the next phase of the project.
- Media with mold were quarantined in oversized Ziploc bags. Depending on their historical value for documenting the school, some moldy media will be cleaned and digitized, while others (including mystery items) will be considered for deaccessioning.
- Plans are being developed for reformatting, which will most likely take place off-site, with specific procedures and formats to be included in the plan.

# Next steps

- When files come back from vendors, Gesell plans to store the files on network storage provided by the school's IT department, knowing that digital storage and preservation planning will be required.
- In terms of storing the original carriers, she found that relocating all media onto one set of shelves, while maintaining the intellectual linkages, has been helpful in getting a handle on audiovisual materials

# Results

- Results reveal that small archives steward a wide variety of formats, including film, videotape, and audiotape, among other formats, and they are not necessarily limited to formats that were popular with consumers (e.g., VHS).
- Archivists are becoming increasingly aware of the need for format migration to more sustainable digital formats, and some have begun this work where others hope to begin.
- Vendors are used exclusively to reformat media, which are used not only for completing the work but also for their expertise on vintage media (e.g., identifying obscure formats).
- Some efforts to provide a digital preservation infrastructure have been made, however, the adoption varies across sites.

# Limitations

- Archivists who may not be addressing moving image and sound collections may be less inclined in participating in this study.
- All archivists interviewed were either actively engaged in some work, or at least thinking about, their moving image and sound collections.

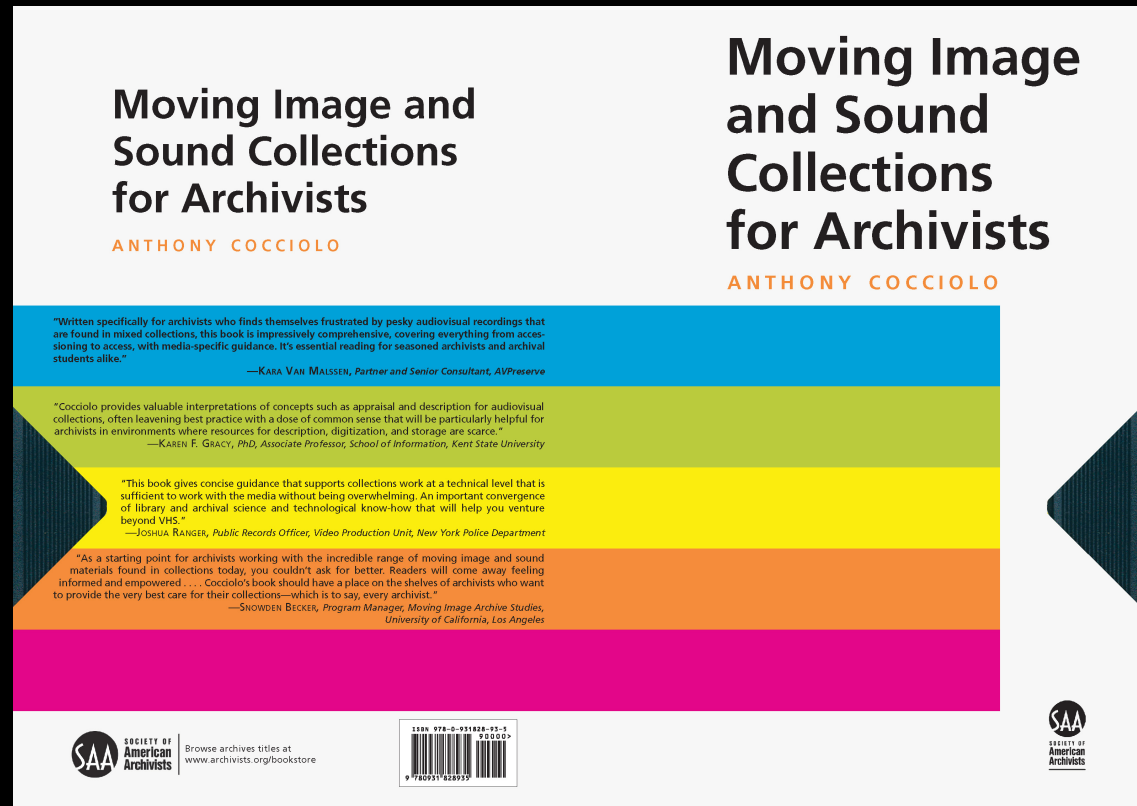


# Conclusion

- Growing recognition that “if I have got the artifact, I have the material” [the words of one study participant] paradigm does not necessarily work for audiovisual collections, in much of the same way that it doesn’t work for born-digital records.
- Need for education on audiovisual collections for general archivists, in much the same way that issues related to digital materials have become more formalized in archives curriculum (e.g., SAA’s Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies).



These issues  
and more are  
explored in  
more depth in  
the book...



Thank you.

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