

CHAPTER 1

INTRO TO ARCHIVES AND MOVING IMAGE COLLECTIONS

Note: Original Google slides are available to [view online or copy to edit](#).

Slide 1 - Title

Slide 2 – What are archives?

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The word "archive" or "archives" can be used in many ways. The two we consider in this course are above.

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Unlike libraries, which have copies of things that are widely available, an archive generally contains collections of rare, unique, and original historical documents, photographs, media, and other materials from individual people or organizations. Because archival material is rare, unique, or original, it requires dedicated time, attention, and resources to preserve in perpetuity.

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Archival collections can include many diverse types of materials.

Slide 6 – What is an archival “collection”?

Unlike many library resources, archival material is not usually arranged according to subject or material type. Keeping material together according to the source of the collection - what we call provenance - is a fundamental principle of archival practice, intended to maintain the original historical context in which material was created.

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For example, this image shows a small sample of material from the papers of avant-garde filmmaker and film professor Stan Brakhage. In addition to documents and correspondence, Brakhage’s archival collection includes photographs, books, maps, artwork, audio, video, and film. If you can think of any reason a person or organization may have filmed or recorded something in the course of their life or work, those films and recordings could later become a part of their historical archival collection.

Slide 8 – What is an archivist?

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Each of these activities will be addressed in subsequent chapters of this course. Important to note is that all of these activities require an archivist to make subjective decisions about what material will be acquired and preserved for future generations. Ethical archival practice requires deliberate self-reflection and careful decision-making by archivists, in effort to provide the most accurate and inclusive historical record possible.

This definition of archivist can also inform our definition of archives. Colloquially, we can say that deleted email goes into an “archive” folder. However, unless those emails are subsequently arranged, described, preserved, and made accessible to others for re-use, they do not comprise an archive in the professional sense.

Notice that SAA’s definition of archivist ends with “records of enduring value.” How do we know what records have “enduring value,” and who decides? That process is called appraisal, and we’ll revisit it in Chapter 4.

Slide 10 – What is a record?

For now, we can ask a more basic question: What is a record? This definition can be broken down into a few important parts.

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First, a record must contain information.

It is difficult to imagine a document that contains no information. However, can you think of a document contains no useful or meaningful information?

Consider a copy of a book that is signed by its author. If the book is otherwise widely published and available, what additional information would this signature provide in an archival collection? Does it include a date, inscription, or further information explaining the context in which the book was signed? For this reason, the presence of a signature by the author is rarely a good enough justification for using institutional resources to preserve it in an archive – unless the signature of that author is particularly rare itself.

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Second, a record must be stored on a medium. Importantly, this means a record can be stored on any medium, which includes paper documents as well as photographs, audio recordings, or digital files. Archival collections can contain information recorded on many diverse formats and media.

Additionally, archival collections cannot contain information that was never recorded. Can you think of situations where important information is not recorded?

Our collective historical record is often limited to the perspectives of people who could read and write, and to people who had access to printing, publishing, and photographic technologies. Moreover, there are many indigenous and other cultures globally in which oral history is the primary means of communicating narratives across generations. These oral traditions do not leave behind material records that can be archived in the traditional Western sense.

This also means that all historical information from an archive is inherently mediated. Despite our best intentions, every primary source document is a limited representation of historical information, reflecting only the purpose and perspective of its creator. We cannot capture everything about a single historical moment in its entirety.

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Last, a record may be either created to be used as evidence of the past or re-purposed now as evidence of the past. Some material that we create in our lives is meant to provide documentation for the future – like photographs, diaries, or business ledgers. However, much of what we create is meant to be used in the moment, without the intention that it will be preserved beyond its present purpose. These latter records of our everyday lives and actions are often the most honest and detailed.

The "accountability" part of this definition will be discussed in Chapter 2. It reflects the development of archives in the 19th and 20th century primarily as repositories of government information, made accessible to public citizens in new democratic systems.

Slide 14 – Moving image archives

So far, we have looked at descriptions of archives and archival material generally. This course is focused specifically on archives of moving image film and analog video material.

When we talk about "moving image archives," we may be talking about different things. Paolo Cherchi Usai, motion picture curator at the George Eastman House Museum, has offered the following categories of film archives:

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National film archives are state-controlled institutions charged with the preservation of a country's national film heritage. Examples include the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome and the New Zealand Film Archive.

Major collections are large collections of motion picture films held by a private institution or collector. For example, you may be familiar with the Rick Prelinger Archives in the US.

Municipal or regional film archives are public or private archives established to preserve the heritage of a city or region. Examples include the Chicago Film Archives or the Münchner Filmmuseum in Germany, which collects films of Bavarian directors.

Specialized collections – institutions that focus on specific subjects, like the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive in Jerusalem or the Anthology Film Archive in New York, which specializes in avant-garde and experimental film.

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Cherchi Usai also distinguishes film archives according to the way their material is primarily accessed and used:

First, programming film archives focus on collecting and restoring films to make them available for public screening. These include the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California, and the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal.

Second, many large film collections were developed to serve the needs of academic film studies programs in the 1960s-1970s. For example, the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research in Madison, Wisconsin, began collecting rare film prints for in-class screenings by University of Wisconsin students.

Last, in addition to preserving motion picture film prints, some institutions collect filmmaking equipment, publicity materials, production documents, and other material representing the history of the motion picture industry. Examples include the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, Italy, and the American Museum of the Moving Image.

All of these models describe dedicated film archives that focus on moving image material specifically. These archives tend to collect individual titles, often completed commercial films, whether narrative, documentary, or avant-garde.

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However, there are also archivists who focus on archival moving image and media materials within broader historical collections, like archives held within universities, historical societies, or government bodies. The archival film and video material at the University of Colorado Boulder Libraries is often found within broader collected records of individual people or organizations, like the example we saw before of the Stan Brakhage collection.

Slide 18 – Types of archival media

In addition to complete films as creative works, archival media can include:

Slide 19 – Production material and outtakes

This could include material like original documentary interviews, cut scenes, alternate takes, or screen tests from the process of shooting and editing a complete project. A collection can also contain original workprints or versions of productions that are different than the version later distributed to audiences.

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For example, archival records of the University of Colorado Boulder Publicity Offices include original footage and sound clips from campus events, buildings, and activities. Reels in this collection have labels like “Stock Show,” “Firefighters” and “Centennial.” Notes like “Narration” and “Outs” (meaning outtakes) indicate the type of production element. Importantly, these reels do not contain complete, edited productions ready for audiences to view. They are original clips and pieces leftover from the publicity offices’ production teams.

Slide 21 – Educational films

Though educational films may have been mass-produced and broadly circulated, many of them are no longer available on film or on more contemporary formats. Collections of rare educational films are often preserved as historical documents and for re- use in new media production.

Slide 22 – Publicity films

Publicity films – including advertising and public service announcements – are often found in the collections of companies, organizations, and politicians. Publicity films are made for a broad public audience, to raise awareness of products, services, or information.

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This is an example of a government publicity film describing the Waste Isolation Pilot Project in Carlsbad, New Mexico. It can be viewed on the CU Digital Library, at <https://cudl.colorado.edu/luna/servlet/detail/CUB~33~33~11~312291>

Slide 24 – Industrial films

Unlike publicity films, industrial films are made for audiences internal to a company or organization. These can include training videos, recorded announcements, or films screened at conventions or annual meetings to highlight and celebrate recent achievements. Industrial films are often rare, and they can offer significant insight into a company’s internal functions and its self-image.

Slide 25 – Home movies and travel footage

Some archival collections can include films and recordings of family events or trips, which were intended to be shared with friends and family. These recordings can be useful as historical reflections of cultural activities and norms.

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This reel of travel footage, from the collection of CU science professor Theodore Cockerell, can be viewed on the CU Digital Library at <https://cudl.colorado.edu/luna/servlet/detail/CUB~11~11~385~226873>

Slide 27 – Television and radio programs

Though much mass entertainment television is now available as home video, DVD, or from streaming platforms, collections of local or public programming are often less accessible. Because early television programs were often broadcast live from studio performances, films and recordings of early television are very rare to find. Radio programs may still be broadcast live, without recordings, even today.

Slide 28 – Recorded events

This can include lectures, speeches, performances, conferences, legal proceedings, ceremonies, or any other event filmed or recorded by a person or organization for posterity. An archival collection may contain original recordings of events that were never copied or available elsewhere.

Slide 29 – Research footage

Research footage refers to original film or media created in the course of scientific or anthropological research, which was not intended to be used or distributed outside of that particular research project. For this reason, research footage often contains rare documentation of phenomena not recorded or available elsewhere.

In addition to the things listed above, archival collections could include voice memos, answering machine messages, legal depositions, interviews, oral histories – really any sound or moving image material created by a person or organization in the course of their lives and work.

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This reel of research footage from a US Air Force rocket launch (1963) was later cited by Edward Condon in his Air Force report, “Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects” (1968), examining the appearance of a mysterious “bright object” in the sky.

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Slide 32 – Bibliography and suggested resources

Slide 33 – Image credits

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