

It can cost up to five figures and take two years... or you can go the one-week or one-day route!

Leo Enticknap, Lecturer in Cinema at the University of Leeds and former curator of the Northern Region Film and Television Archive, assesses the world of archive training



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Since the early 1990s, moving image and sound archiving has made the transition from a profession in which initial training and professional skills development thereafter was essentially unstructured and on-the-job, to one in which the majority of new entrants arrive with some sort of formal qualification and will undertake a number of independently provided, smaller scale training courses as their careers progress.

Both the archive professionals and those who educate and train them face three formidable challenges. To start with, we are a very small workforce: it is estimated that in total, 2,000–3,000 people worldwide earn their living as the custodians of historical moving images and sound. The diversity of educational opportunities and opportunities for professional interactivity that the more widespread professions such as law and medicine take for granted are not so readily available to us. Secondly, the technology, culture, regulation and economics of the media we preserve are changing very rapidly. This gives us the unusual challenge of having to preserve obsolete skills and knowledge while simultaneously becoming familiar with the new ones that made them obsolete in the first place. And finally, there is an inescapably political dimension to our work, in the form of the constant need to fight the urge of both public and private sector purse-string holders to regard media preservation as having a relatively low priority.

Cutting the funding to hospitals or reducing the production budget for a major series have immediate consequences, whereas the effects of squeezing a national film archive or a studio library may only become apparent decades later. A unique work environment and profile of skills, therefore, demands an equally unique approach to the education and training needed to prepare for it.

Started in Norwich

The first attempts to put the training of moving image archivists onto a systematic and formal footing came from higher education. In 1990 the University of East Anglia (UEA), in Norwich, UK, began to offer an archiving variant of its already well established MA degree in film studies, in which vocational training in film preservation and management provided by the East Anglian Film Archive replaced some of the academic syllabus.¹ It remained the only such course anywhere in the world for over a decade, until the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) launched a similar degree in 2002.

Two others in the US (George Eastman House and New York University) followed shortly afterwards, and were soon joined by a distance-learning diploma from Charles Sturt University in Australia and an MA at the University

of Amsterdam. A relatively new (established in 2006) MA offered by the State Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart, Germany,² is breaking new ground by systematically integrating the conservation of traditional and 'born digital' media in its syllabus. However, the one major catch for many readers of this magazine is that the programme is taught in a combination of English and German, and students are required to be fluent in both languages. The Amsterdam MA is taught entirely in English.

Most archivists entering professional grade jobs in public sector archives today, and a significant (though probably lower) proportion of those entering commercial collections or establishing themselves as freelance researchers are likely to have one of these postgraduate qualifications. Most of those who do not, arrive via a sideways move within larger organisations, e.g. from a post-production to an archiving role for a broadcaster, or come to audiovisual archiving from a job looking after paper-based collections. The hybrid academic and practical nature of the film-archiving MA has its supporters and its detractors.

The former argue that the research-based and curatorial nature of the job demands a multi-skilled professional of the sort that only this model can provide: in other words, someone who is equally at home evaluating the relative merits of molecular sieves versus vented cans as they are in understanding Stanley Baldwin's political objectives for a speech he made in a 1935 newsreel. The latter assert, as a chief projectionist I once worked for put it, that film is "this wide (holds thumb and forefinger approximately 35mm apart) and goes through a projector" – i.e. that you don't need to know your psychoanalysis from your postmodernism in order to lace up a Steenbeck!

Most of the MA courses take 12 months and are full-time, with the exception of Amsterdam (18 months) and UCLA (two years). The core syllabus is pretty similar within all of them, though they offer a slightly differing profile of

¹ – For an account of the development and early years of this course, see Jane Alvey, 'Film Archive Training' in James Ballantyne (ed.), *Researchers' Guide to British Film and Television Collections*, 4th ed., London, BUFVC (1993), pp.27–29.

² – See www.mediaconservation.org

specialities – for example, the Eastman House courses emphasise traditional craft skills of film handling and duplication. Amsterdam specialises in curatorial work and programming, while UCLA offers particular strengths in cataloguing, metadata and records management related to audio-visual collections.

Need degree plus experience

The entry requirements vary only in the details. The bottom line is that you'll need a good undergraduate degree from a reputable university, plus some substantial professional and/or volunteering experience related to the field. Funding is also an issue that any potential student will of course have to keep in mind. The total cost, including living expenses, from enrolment to graduation can easily run into five figures.

Whatever its merits as an overall training and education package, the implications of the cost, length, location and entry requirements of a film archiving MA can rule it out for some. It has been apparent for some years that smaller scale alternatives are needed, both to provide substantive upskilling and to keep archivists abreast of new developments in the field. Provision in this area is growing steadily. The British Universities' Film and Video Council and FOCAL International have for a long time offered both Footage Training weeks (this year – London in June, and later in the year in Manchester) as well as one-day courses in specific aspects of the job, and last year Skillset launched a funding scheme to provide basic archival media training for professionals in related areas. Technology manufacturers

and software developers are also increasingly offering short training courses in the use of their products.

I would predict that in the medium term, an internationally recognised and standardised form of professional accreditation for media archivists will emerge and earn the sector's acceptance. In America, the Education Committee of the Association of Moving Image Archivists has had such a scheme under consideration for some time, and is already organising workshops at the annual conference which have been recognised by the Society of American Archivists as ongoing training provision for its membership.

In the short term, formal education and training will become an increasingly important part of archivists' professional lives. It will be on offer all the way from a half-day course on a new software package to a PhD in media history, and it will be for archivists (and their employers) to decide what is needed and at what stage in their careers.

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