

Gauging Interest: Media Preservation Literacy and the Public Library

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Introduction

Media requires continual preservation—a fact that is likely obvious to readers of this journal, but not something most of the public fully comprehends. As media consumption moves in an increasingly digital direction, fewer members of the public will be familiar with older media forms and the techniques necessary to preserve their own heritage, and the collective heritage of the twentieth century, or even recognize that these materials need to be preserved at all. As public libraries more frequently use DVDs, Blu-rays, and streaming services to engage patrons, older media formats in their collections—including 16mm films—which may contain unique content run the risk of being forgotten about and left to deteriorate due to negligent storage practices. Despite these two coinciding factors, public libraries remain undervalued as sites for media preservation education, both in academic discourse and in the collective mindset of librarians and archivists. While there are plausible explanations for this disconnect, I suggest that the public library is nonetheless an essential and untapped resource for hosting programs designed to educate the public about media preservation requirements and best practices. The purpose of this article, therefore, is twofold: 1) to discuss the implementation and results of such a pilot program and 2) to propose strategies and ideas for further exploration of this issue.

While media archival pedagogy and education have been the subjects of renewed academic interest, few academic works take seriously the possibility of educating the public at large about media preservation. Scholars agree that media preservation is of interest to the general public—as Hans Dieter Huber succinctly puts it, “where nothing is displayed to the public, nothing can be remembered” (2019, 13)—but there are a scarce number of publications exploring how to teach non-specialized audiences about media preservation. Many articles discuss the pedagogy of

social media or born-digital media (Bastian, Cloonan, and Harvey 2011; Copeland 2011; Rust 2017), and more explore the pedagogy of media at large in public libraries (Andrews and McDougall 2012; Gustafson 2017). There are also manuals that teach media preservation, including Anthony Cocciolo's comprehensive and approachable *Moving Image and Sound Collections for Archivists* (2017), and while numerous helpful online resources are available, their barrier to entry—that is, the basic understanding that media require preservation—still necessitates active efforts at outreach and education. Few works interrogate the spaces in which this non-specialized media preservation education takes place, or outline best practices for that education outside of the formal classroom setting.

Two recent dissertations discuss non-specialized media preservation literacy and pedagogy in spaces other than the public library, exploring the ways in which this education can be undertaken in media centres and dedicated workshops. Yu-En Hsieh charts the change in skill and attitude among workshop participants over the course of five years in Taiwan, ultimately concluding that

schools from K-12 to college should incorporate media archiving into their curricula. Learning by preserving their home movies serves a pedagogical purpose, affording students both experience and knowledge of media literacy and preservation, which empowers them to deal with their families' obsolete media artifacts and acknowledge their family [sic] ordinary images as significant cultural heritage artifacts. (2018, 186)

Hsieh's years-long study bears out the claim that non-traditional spaces are undervalued for media preservation education. Lindsay Kistler Mattock similarly looks at the important role of media arts centres for preservation and education. She notes that these hubs of media activity have been “described as separate and unequal to professional archives,” and that they “have not been fully acknowledged by archival practice or archival historians” (2014, 185). These spaces, she determines, “emphasize the need for outreach initiatives that address the specific technological and visual literacies necessary to fully engage with audiovisual records” (186). I contend that public libraries are similarly disregarded as sites of media preservation and education, which is further borne out by the relative lack of literature on the topic. As such, it is clear that more research can and should be done to gauge the effectiveness of certain spaces as sites of media preservation pedagogy. With this in mind, this article discusses one such option.

The Program

In my role as library associate, and later librarian, I tested my hypothesis by hosting an event at a Jefferson Parish public library to increase media preservation literacy, utilizing an existing public library program—Classic Movie Night—geared toward adults in the community. I marketed the program not as an information literacy seminar but as a continuation of this regular movie night, with the additional “hook” of seeing a film projected “live.” The draw of seeing how a classic film may have been

projected—in a repertory theatre, home, or even a public library—in the years immediately following its release, or before the advent of home video, was not just an educational opportunity, but an old-fashioned marketing technique.

This program was designed to be approachable for a wide range of attendees, based on my previous interactions with the community and the demographics of the Jefferson Parish library system as a whole. Jefferson Parish, located in southeast Louisiana, stretches from the southern tip of the state to Lake Pontchartrain, encompassing the area directly to the west and south of the city of New Orleans. The Parish library system includes sixteen branches which, per the U.S. Census Bureau (2023), serve a total population of around 440,000. While considered part of the Greater New Orleans Region, these locations serve mostly suburban, unincorporated areas: the River Ridge library, the branch at which this program took place, serves a population of approximately 13,500. The neighbourhood in which it is located is made up of two distinct communities: older residents who moved to the area as it was being developed, and younger families interested in raising their children in a suburban locale. As the survey results below suggest, these demographics have differing knowledge of media history, so the program had to be built with broad appeal in mind.

Attendees were shown John Cromwell's *In Name Only* (1939), starring Cary Grant and Carole Lombard. In many ways, this film fit perfectly within the scope of Classic Movie Night as the program had been run up to this point, allowing for a discussion on its leads' careers, historical views on social issues, and the evolution of film style; however, in other ways, the screening was an outlier. The film is not well-known in the "canon," having only been given a made-on-demand DVD-R release as part of the not-found-on-store-shelves Warner Archive Collection. This relative obscurity allowed patrons to approach the film without pre-existing perceptions and helped them realize the value of underseen and underdiscussed works. The film was also chosen because I hold a 16mm print of it in my home collection, and thus was able to project it live for patrons, using the time between reel changes to discuss the traditional methods of projection used in movie theatres (see Figure 1).

The post-screening presentation and discussion, usually designed around a textual analysis of the film or its history, as discussed above, focused instead primarily on media loss and preservation. This lecture was designed around home media formats as well as formats that would be found in a library—analogue tape (VHS, Hi8), small-gauge film (8mm, Super8, 16mm), and digital tape (MiniDV)—which I assumed that patrons would most likely be familiar with. The presentation began with a broad overview of film as a physical form, then explored reasons for film loss or degradation, such as fire (in the case of nitrate film) and vinegar syndrome (in the case of acetate film). Patrons were also given brief explanations for the loss and degradation of tape-based media. They were then asked to consider why film is important for our collective heritage, and why a film like *In Name Only* might be worth viewing in the twenty-first century. From here, patrons were told several practical steps they could take at home to take care of their own media collections, such as storing them in a cool, dry environment and performing regular condition checks. The planned outcome of this program was an increased awareness of media preservation best prac-

tices as well as the importance of home media preservation—an outcome that proved successful.



Figure 1: The author presents a small-gauge film to program attendees, many of whom had never witnessed film projection before. Photo courtesy of Ryan Jalbert.

Survey Results

A two-part survey was handed out to evaluate the effectiveness of a preservation literacy workshop in a non-classroom setting. As the survey was optional, not all attendees chose to respond, either in full or in part. Eight of the event's thirteen attendants answered questions before and after the presentation regarding their familiarity with home media formats, causes of media loss, and possible preservation methods. The pre-presentation survey questions were chosen to gauge respondents' awareness of major issues in media preservation, while the post-presentation questions were designed to have patrons reflect on their increased knowledge and ability to take action to preserve their own media. These questions ranged from "What percentage of film made before 1929 is lost?" and "What are possible causes for media loss?" to "What formats are you familiar with or do you have at home?"

Additionally, patrons were asked to rate their own understanding of media preservation on a scale from one to ten, with one meaning "not at all knowledgeable" and ten meaning "very knowledgeable." While most attendees reported having hands-on experience with at least one of the media formats discussed in the presentation, few rated themselves as knowledgeable regarding preservation of home media: before the presentation, the average self-reported score was below two. After the presentation, this number leapt close to six, with every response on the post-presentation survey higher than those on the pre-presentation survey. Although this figure is based on self-reporting, the implications of this data are worth considering. While nearly every respondent had crossed paths with film or tape-based media, and many still had them stored at home, few viewed themselves as knowledgeable enough to

maintain them as part of their personal collections prior to the presentation. Learning about media preservation best practices, including simple steps they themselves could take to be proactive about safeguarding their media, helped patrons feel more confident in their own ability to care for their media collections. This newfound confidence can possibly lead them to take the first steps in the care process.

One response on the pre-discussion survey had suggested that excessive cold may be responsible for media loss; by the end of the presentation, patrons clearly understood that heat and humidity—not the cold—are the main environmental concerns for film and tape-based media. Patrons were also consistently able to list several basic methods for media storage (“store in a cool, dry place”; “store in cool home environment”; “keep it inside, cold & dry”). This point is particularly relevant in Jefferson Parish and its warm, humid Gulf Coast environment. While one patron responded that their knowledge of home media preservation had not improved as dramatically, they nonetheless noted that they would consider taking their stored items “to a media specialist or someone knowledgeable,” which suggests an increased awareness of the importance of preservation work and the surrounding issues.

Recommendations and Takeaways

One of the most frequently asked questions in media preservation studies is “what gets saved, and why?” (Frick 2011). This article suggests that one of the answers can be found in our incomplete approach to media preservation education, and that a fuller answer to this question must involve a re-evaluation of non-traditional teaching spaces, such as the public library. Public library patrons may not attend archival screening nights, experimental microcinema showcases, or media preservation lectures; they may not even be aware of the existence of these events. Nonetheless, these patrons may hold or have access to valuable media that is worth saving—home movies, inherited collections, tapes of live broadcasts, and more. It is somewhat paradoxical, but nonetheless apparent, that the materials which require the most care are often held by those with the least knowledge to care for them. Hsieh found that even in a culture like Taiwan’s, which heavily values the transmission of generational memory,

few people pay attention to their own home movies, let alone think they are important enough to transform a history or change a stereotype about the past. However, through collective efforts at saving home movies owned by ordinary people, the history of and stereotypes about the so-called “underrepresented” have been changed. (2018, 151)

Making the public understand that their own media has value, and giving them the tools to care for it, is not easy—archives and museums can feel exclusionary and intimidating, especially if patrons already feel unwelcome in the academic world or unknowledgeable about preservation methods. Approaching them, instead, through public libraries, a place they may visit periodically or even often enough to consider “their own”—and which itself is underutilized as a place for preservation—is a way

to meet people where they are, within their comfort zone.

It is equally important to take a gentle approach to the material itself so as not to scare patrons away. This program was marketed not as a media preservation course but as a chance to see a 16mm film projected in person. While some patrons would likely have attended a screening regardless of the format, using analogue media had several benefits. First, it served as an additional reason for attending—feature-length film projections are not very common in the Jefferson Parish area. Second, it emphasized that film and media are material objects, while disguising education as entertainment. The filmmaking maxim “show, don’t tell” applies equally to teaching: having patrons interact with the film object imparts its value and fragility far more than a lecture alone could. In effect, the information literacy portions of the evening were hidden like a dog’s medicine in a roll of cheese, disguised in such a way that patrons welcomed them with great appetite.

This program format is likely difficult for public libraries to run every month; thus, a collaborative approach with local or regional media archives would be beneficial for all parties involved. While media holdings will vary among institutions, many public libraries today do not typically house large collections of analogue media with which to develop a program like the one discussed above—I myself used a film print from my own collection for this event. A partnership with a local archive can provide public libraries with the physical material necessary to hold a film-based screening and discussion, while archives can use the library to reach new audiences. Admittedly, public library program attendance can vary wildly: while the event discussed in this article had only thirteen attendants, a similar program I hosted later, at a different location, saw more than 150 people turn out. Cross-promotion and collection sharing can only increase attendance, and potentially put patrons in touch with archivists in a familiar setting. This olive branch may result in distrustful community members reconsidering—or considering for the first time—developing a relationship with an archive.

Some public libraries may have small-gauge film or analogue videotape scattered throughout their own collections. Libraries with existing VHS or film print collections should utilize those collections regularly, not only for educational purposes, but also to ensure they do not wither away on a shelf. Using these materials in programming will require continual preservation and regular maintenance efforts, or at least a general condition check. Ultimately, material that can be exploited for programming is more valuable than material that sits ignored, by virtue of it being utilized at all.

Conclusions

It is clear from the results of the survey and from discussions with attendees that media preservation education in public libraries is a valuable avenue toward increased media literacy in the populace at large. Audiences are willing and able to learn about preservation practices if the material is marketed and presented to them in an accessible and engaging way—and if they are not fully aware of what it is they will be learning. As Mattock suggests, media arts centres can provide “an open, dynamic,

and pluralistic structure for archives” and “possibilities for new models for the preservation and archivization [sic] of audiovisual media . . . for all organizations and institutions preserving these materials” (2014, 186). So too can public libraries.

While it is noteworthy that even one presentation made a difference in attendee confidence and knowledge, this study is limited by its singular nature—patrons may attend programming on a sporadic basis. A similar study taken over a longer period of time, such as the one undertaken by Hsieh (2018), would provide more opportunity for exploring the general benefits of media preservation education. I hope that future scholars will continue this work and consider collaborations with or use of their own public library to expand our conception of the range of valuable sites for education, preservation, and analogue media.

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