

**Presenting Information:
A Comparison of Descriptive Tools and Access Policies**

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This paper will compare the access policies of the Anthology Film Archives (AFA) and the Fales Library and Special Collections at NYU (Fales) by way of an evaluation and comparison of the physical, virtual, and intellectual access to material that they provide to visitors.

Due to staffing transitions at AFA I was only able to visit their collection virtually. I was, however, able to visit the Fales collection in person. I took a tour of the archive with Brent Philips, who is the Media Archivist and Processing Specialist there, and had the opportunity to ask him questions about their access policies. Brent was exceptionally nice, answered all of my questions and took an interest in the assignment at large. I arrived at Fales with a worksheet that I had prepared with all of the observations I wanted to make and questions I needed to ask, which I found not only kept my interview with Brent on topic but also provided me with the opportunity to write down Brent's answers and my observations as we went along.

Virtual Access

Fales' virtual access is well organized and provides a thorough introduction to the collection in a manner that is both effective and easy to navigate. Fales' hours, location, access requirements, and contact information are all displayed directly on its homepage. Fales' homepage also features a link to an overview of the entire collection, which includes Fales' mission statement and a brief summary of their holdings.

The "Services" tab provides detailed information about an array of additional particulars that a visitor might require, including Fales' policy regarding photocopies and photography, publication and use fees, fees for reproducing (scanning or photographing) material for research purposes, and a schedule of fees for the commercial reproduction of material (in print, electronic, moving image, exhibition, and microform publication formats). This tab also provides a link to forms that a visitor might need to access before, during or after their visit, for example a reader registration form, or a request form for the reproduction of material.

Additionally, because Fales refuses to allow the reproduction of any material without the permission of the copyright holder, there is information within this tab about copyright including links to The WATCH File, a virtual database of copyright contacts run by the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and NYU's Handbook for Use of Copyrighted Materials.

The information contained within this website is very thorough, and the only substantial improvement would be the addition of an initial menu within the "Services" tab that would allow a visitor to jump to the information about a particular subject directly rather than having to scroll down the page until they find the information they are searching for.

Overall AFA's virtual access offers researchers some pertinent information about the collection, however this information is difficult to locate and is not totally sufficient or complete. AFA's virtual access is slightly more cluttered and difficult to navigate than Fales', but this is likely due in part to the fact that in addition to being an archival collection, AFA is also a film exhibition space.

To find out information about their archives, visitors to the AFA website must click on the "Collections" tab on their homepage. This brings visitors to a page that has an "Overview" of the collection, which functions as a two paragraph-long summary of their holdings and a disclaimer informing visitors that, "Because of staffing transitions, the film archive will be closed until early 2012."¹

Finding more substantive information pertinent to visiting AFA and viewing material is difficult and unintuitive. Information including how to make an appointment to view material, how to make research requests, contact information, fee information, and information about AFA's hours is located under the "Books/Paper Materials" tab, but a researcher looking for this information would only come across it by accident since there is no indication that this information should be located here.

Intellectual Access

Overall Fales offers excellent intellectual access to its material. Navigating the website is straightforward and every collection has a finding aid (there are 194 finding aids in total) that provides the scope, content, biographical information, arrangement, access points, restrictions, and administrative information about the collection. The finding aids are catalogued to item level, making it easy for researchers to browse the finding aids and familiarize themselves with the material before they arrive.

In addition to their browse-able finding aids, Fales also has a search tool that may be accessed via a hyperlink from the "Archival Collections" page. In addition to a query function that allows visitors to search the Fales collections using Boolean logic, the search tool also has several sidebars that allow visitors to browse results by "People", "LCSH Subject Heading", "Places" or "Document Type". When a search is performed the results are listed on a collection-by-collection basis wherein the search terms occur. However in addition, for every result there is the option to click a "show occurrences" button, which then provides the container, box, folder,

¹ < <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/collections/collections-landing> > Last accessed 7 Nov 2011

and item information for every instance of the keyword that the search returns. This is a useful feature of the search tool because it allows visitors to quickly and accurately locate specific material. Having the option either to browse the collection or to perform a search for material is enormously beneficial to researchers and provides a robust mechanism for accessing material.

The only area in which the intellectual access at Fales could be improved is in regards to their digital content. Except for in select cases (e.g., where the digitization of material was provided for in the acquisition of a collection) audio-visual material is not available for streaming. However, Fales is very aware that digitization will yield broader access and is therefore making a conscientious push towards in-house digitization and streaming of material. Fales has several digital and streaming initiatives currently underway, including, according to Brent Philips, a project that will provide a dedicated playback station at Fales that will stream material from its newest collection, the Gay Cable Network archives, to researchers wishing to view material from the collection.

In contrast to the thorough intellectual access that the Fales collection provides, the intellectual access offered by the AFA is more modest and distinctly less complete. The “Overview” section of their website discusses the formats their archive contains, and the words, “movies”, “film stills” and “audio recordings” are all hyperlinked to distinct pages that contain information about the scope and content of each category of media in their archive. The information contained within some of these pages is frustratingly sparse and difficult to use.

The only information on the “Film/Video” page is a link to a list entitled, “Films Preserved by Anthology Film Archives” with a disclaimer noting that this list is only partial since it is an “inventory in progress”.² The list is alphabetized by director and contains the director’s name, the title of the film, the year it was produced, and occasionally a note about where the film was preserved. The “Books/Paper Materials” is even less helpful. A link re-directs visitors to a list entitled, “Periodicals Available in the Jerome Hill Library at Anthology Film Archives,”³ which provides an alphabetized list of periodicals and the years for which they have issues, but nothing more.

The lack of metadata available online about the material AFA holds is problematic. Because there is no effective way to perform a search for a particular individual, title, keyword, or collection, the only way to find material is to scroll through the lists of books/paper materials, audio recordings, film/video, etc. Organizing information this way virtually ensures that a

² < <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/collections/preserved>> Last accessed 7 Nov 2011

³ < <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/collections/periodicals>> Last accessed 7 Nov 2011

researcher will be unable to find the necessary information or material without having to contact AFA's archivists, which may or may not have been their intent.

Given that access to material is a foundational tenet of AFA's mission statement,⁴ the current disorganized states of their virtual and intellectual access are most likely due to understaffing and under-funding rather than a desire for material to remain unseen. The fact that AFA's website notes that there are several digital access initiatives currently underway lends credence to the claim that they place a high value on access to material, and also supports the hope that the state of their current intellectual access is only temporary.

Physical Access

Access to material at Fales is limited to, "NYU students, faculty and staff, as well as qualified alumni, researchers, and scholars from other institutions throughout the US and abroad."⁵ All visitors are required to make an appointment at least 48 hours before arriving. Because Fales is located within Bobs Library at NYU, visitors must check in with security before arriving at the archive and must also provide a valid I.D. When visitors arrive at Fales they are asked to fill out a Reader's Application, which includes information such as their name, permanent address, and institutional affiliation.

The research space is a large, open-planned room that researchers share with the receptionist—a student worker who is always and who monitors the researchers from the reception desk. A copy of the Reading Room Rules is prominently displayed on every table. The room is well lit and consists of four wooden tables with a capacity of four researchers per table. The chairs are moderately comfortable and, because appointments are staggered, researchers usually have an entire table to themselves. There are only four usable outlets for computer chargers in the research space but this number is normally sufficient given the careful scheduling of appointments.

There are two playback stations next to the tables consisting of a DVD player, a VHS player, a remote control and a pair of headphones. This set-up is far from ideal. Although a

⁴ AFA's mission statement is to, "...preserve, promote, and exhibit independent, experimental, and artist film and video. Through modern preservation techniques – both digital and photochemical – Anthology works to make these films accessible to the general public through screenings, on site research, and on-line viewing." The statement may be accessed in full at:

< <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/collections/film-video>> Last accessed 7 Nov 2011

⁵ < <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/abouttest.html>> Last accessed 7 Nov 2011

researcher watching a DVD would have headphones on, the moving images onscreen may prove a distraction to other researchers in the Reading Room. Additionally, because there is no way to adjust the lighting in the Reading Room researchers must watch DVDs in bright light. Building a separate room or even a separate cubicle to house the playback stations would be an improvement on the current situation. Another problem with the current viewing arrangement at Fales is that the two playback stations currently in use are not enough, and researchers are occasionally forced to re-schedule their appointments to review material because the playback stations are both being used.

Finally, although in theory Fales supports the concept of allowing researchers to watch media in its original format, due to staffing and funding constraints this is almost never possible. Almost all the media that researchers request to view is transferred in-house from its original format to DVD, and the researcher is given the DVD viewing copy to watch on the playback station in the Reading Room.

Likewise, the statement on AFA's website regarding original formats is emphatically in favor of watching media in its original format, especially with regard to film: "As an institution we feel strongly that motion pictures that were made on film (35mm, 16mm, or 8mm) should be exhibited in their original formats, but we do appreciate the accessibility of digital video and audio, especially for those unable to visit our theaters on a regular basis."⁶ Currently, AFA offers in-house digital transfers of 16mm, 1/4" audio, 3/4" U-matic video, VHS, and cassette tapes for in-house screening.⁷

In conclusion, Fales' virtual and intellectual access to moving image material is both excellent. Although small improvements could be made, the overall presentation of information in these realms is robust. Their physical access to moving image material is very good but leaves room for improvement, which could include a separation space for researchers to view moving image material in addition to a larger number of playback stations.

Providing access to moving image material is expensive, and historically it has been more difficult for institutions that deal with experimental and avant-garde material to sustain themselves financially because the material is less commercially exploitable and not as widely

⁶ < <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/collections/film-video> > Last accessed 7 Nov 2011

⁷ Note: Due to the aforementioned "staffing transitions" it was not possible to determine the other attributes of the research space at AFA.

studied.⁸ AFA in particular has always sought to provide access in spite of the cost involved, and the current state of its physical, virtual, and intellectual access speaks directly to this struggle.

AFA's virtual access is adequate, but could be improved by grouping information more concisely and subdividing it into distinct pages, so that, for instance, information about AFA's hours of operation fall under an appropriately titled page or tab rather than under the "Books/Paper Materials" page (where it is currently located). AFA's intellectual access, however, is poor. Their information is partial and does not provide enough information for a researcher to determine AFA's holdings without the help of an AFA archivist. By in essence forcing researchers to make an official enquiry to AFA to determine the contents of AFA's collections, AFA not only wastes the researcher's time but also wastes the time of the archivists, who's time may be better spent on preservation or improving access in other capacities.

Works Cited

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<http://issuu.com/namac/docs/hidden_histories>

⁸ For more on this subject, please see: High, Kathy. Ed. *A Closer Look / Hidden Histories*, "Secrets in the Archives: Hidden Stories, Necessary Releases : Melinda Stone in Conversation with Andrew Lampert and Rick Prelinger." De Michiel, Helen, Ser. Ed. National Alliance for Media Arts & Culture: San Francisco, 2005. p. 54-63. Available online at: <http://issuu.com/namac/docs/hidden_histories> Last accessed 7 Nov 2011