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Access to Moving Image Collections

11/02/2011

Accessing the Imperial War Museum Archives and the Tamiment Collection

There are a few things that an archival institution must possess for it be able to describe itself as an accessible resource. The most basic requirement is that the institution must offer its users some means of viewing its material – whether by setting up streaming digital files, providing reformatted physical access copies, or by stockpiling different kinds of equipment to allow the material to be viewed in its original format. However, in order to locate the material they need to view, the institution must provide a way for the user to search according to their need; therefore, a finding aid or digital catalog is the second crucial element. Even before reaching this step, though, there's an even more important factor: the institution has to make it as clear as possible to users what exactly its access policies are. If researches can't get past this step, they may not even make it as far as the catalog, and certainly will never get the opportunity to view the material that justifies the archive's existence.

In the digital age, the user's first encounter with an archive will almost invariably be through their website. At bare minimum, an archive's website should clearly state their general collection mandate and access policies so the user can judge whether it's worth their time to go and investigate the collection. Therefore, the first thing I looked for when I viewed the Imperial War Museum Archive's page was to see how it presented itself online and how many of my questions about access I could have answered simply by checking their website. The answer turned out to be “essentially all of them”. A visit to the Imperial War Museum homepage led me straight to a large button labeled “Search the Collection,” clearly presented at the bottom of the page; from there, I could follow an easy set of links to reach a page titled “Access and Use of the Collections.” This page not only provided me with the basic information about address and hours, but told me that I could drop in to the Explore History

Center to view general-access materials and browse the library and that I could make an appointment to consult a specialist librarian and use the Research Room. It offered me an easy form to fill out to reserve an appointment, and different links to information specifically designed for researchers and for commercial vendors. When I specified that I wanted to look in the film collection, it even provided me with a list of Frequently Asked Questions to let me know what the collection held both in terms of content and format, what formats the content could be transferred into, how a user could request content be reformatted and mailed (for a fee) on DVD or VHS, and what I should do if I wanted to donate material to the collection. The only information I was not able to discover through the site was exactly how I could view archival film on-site; while both the FAQ and Research Room information indicated that this was an option, they did not provide details on the film viewing equipment.

The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives also had an easy link to their access policies on their website, although the information that they provided was not quite as welcoming and encouraging as the Imperial War Museum's. The "About" page told me the library's hours and the fact that, while the collection was theoretically open to the public, researchers would have to obtain a day pass to enter the building (Bobst Library) that housed the institution. From there, I followed a link to the "Research Visits/Library Services" page to learn that to access the collections, I should register to fill out a form and obtain a pass. The page also included helpfully specific details about the kinds of access that would be available on-site, including computers for searching the catalog, microfilm readers, and photocopy services; there was no specific information on viewing moving image material. The Tamiment equivalent of the Imperial War Museum's "FAQ" document was a page entitled "Ten Things To Know Before Visiting Tamiment," which provided much of the same information (rephrased in simpler form) as had been available on the previous page, as well as instructions to investigate the information about each of the collections for more information. By obediently following these instructions and going to the collection overview, I was finally able to discover information about the moving image collection by clicking on the link titled "Non-Print

Collections.” There I learned that, as a visitor, I could view documentaries and feature films from the collection in Bobst Library's Avery Fisher Media Center, or request to screen copies of archival film footage. Curious about their film screening abilities, I went into the finding aid for this collection, and discovered that screening the footage here referred to requesting VHS screening copies for research purposes, presumably also to be viewed in the Avery Fisher Center.

Without a ticket to the United Kingdom, I couldn't compare the Imperial War Museum's in-person accessibility to their friendly virtual persona. Tamiment, however, was right there on the top floor of my own university library, so I decided to stop by, pretend I knew nothing about their access policies from the website, and see what I could find out in person. From the first, Tamiment proved itself more security-conscious than welcoming. The door to the institution on the tenth floor of Bobst Library is kept locked even during open hours, though you can see the welcome desk through the glass, and they request that you buzz in so that the archivist can prepare for your presence. Once I had made it through the first hurdle, I approached the archivist at the front desk and asked about accessing the moving image collections. Perhaps demonstrating the principle that an archivist never has enough time to both help visitors and perform his daily functions, he didn't seem particularly interested in talking to me; he informed me that I could find out the information that I needed online, and, when pressed, gave me the card of the non-print media archivist so that I could email her for more information. “But what if,” I asked, “I was just walking in to do research today and wanted to know how to access media materials?” He told me I could search the collection online for it, and anything that they had downstairs in Avery Fisher I could request there. This seemed like a dismissal, and so I followed his instructions. My visit had yielded me one piece of important information, at least: the Tamiment Library certainly expects its website to provide all the information a researcher might need.

Before going down to the Avery Fisher Center, I paused to evaluate the search catalog online. The website told me that for materials held in the Avery Fisher Center, I could search the Bobst library catalog, BobCat. The difficulty here was limiting my search to just Tamiment's collection, and not any

of the library's other holdings. I tried to cross-reference Tamiment's finding aids with the Bobst library website to discover what was available for viewing, but none of the video material that the finding aids included in their collection descriptions seemed to be present in the Bobst system. Finally, I resorted to the somewhat crude expedient of typing in "Tamiment", specifying "video," and seeing what came up. My search generated 93 items labeled as belonging to the Tamiment Library, and, armed with a request for "The Changing Situation of Workers And Their Unions," I went down six floors to investigate the site.

The Avery Fisher Center provides separate media viewing stations for DVDs and for film, all of which are controlled by the front desk. When you fill out a request, including title and call number, one of the staff will find the item for you and insert it into a player in the back that's hooked up to the system, then direct you to the appropriate station, which is already provided with headphones. The researcher has the ability from the viewing station to stop, rewind, fast-forward, and adjust the volume, and can take notes on a personal notepad or computer, but obviously cannot take screencaps or anything else beyond the most basic viewing functionality. Still, there are plenty of stations available so that many viewers can access material at one time, and the staff seemed competent and helpful – or at least willing to help out an NYU student. Without an NYU ID, though, it would likely be much more difficult for a researcher interested in Tamiment's collection to get in the door, check out materials for viewing, or even figure out what was a part of the collection that they were entitled to access at all. There is no clear way to differentiate help services at the Avery Fisher Center from those intended to help the NYU student body, and, as indicated above, the archivists at the main Tamiment site are not well-equipped to assist people searching for moving image materials. While Tamiment's collections are technically open and accessible to the public, therefore, and they do provide good finding aids to let you know what they have, it seems that the only really effective way to view any part of their collection is to email the moving image archivist and wait until they have time to confer with you to make an appointment.

By contrast, the Imperial War Museum provides not only one easily searchable catalog specifically for their moving image collection, but two. The catalog on their main site allows one to hunt for material by title, production date, production company, and type of film (black-and-white or color). Once a record of the item is located, the researcher can click a button labeled “Add Item to My List.” The page this links to explains that, once the user has finished browsing the catalog, the completed list can be sent to the archives as a request for an onsite viewing appointment or for more information. To make a commercial request for a copy of the footage, the item number can be sent through a page called “My Orders.”

This catalog provides an unusually high level of user-friendly functionality for a traditional archive, and one gets the impression that the Imperial War Museum fields many requests to view and use their footage. Whether their website is so user-friendly on account of the number of requests, or whether they get the high volume of requests due to their commitment to clear information and easy access, is the sort of chicken-and-egg question it's impossible to answer without more statistical information. However, there is also another catalog with perhaps an even higher level of functionality, and my one complaint is that the one catalog does not link directly to the other. This is their digital catalog, which not only allows the user to search through the large number of moving image materials that the archives have reformatted to be accessible as streaming video, but again specifically assists the commercial user by providing tools for downloading sample clips to assist in their planning.

In short, the entire experience of exploring the Imperial War Museum, from a distance, made me wish that I was pursuing this project somewhere across the Atlantic Ocean—and, unfortunately, my experiences at Tamiment Library didn't change that wish. Both institutions, in their own very different ways, seem to have embraced the idea of virtual access as extremely important to their overall access policy. However, virtual access isn't everything; my difficulties at Tamiment made that clear, and perhaps, if I did get the chance to visit the Imperial War Museum in person, my experience there would have undone all their virtual good work. I hope someday to get the chance to find out.