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Access to Collections

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**Comparing Access Policies: The La Guardia and Wagner Archives and
The National Museum of the American Indian (New York City)**

The mission of a memory institution can be gauged by the access policies of its archives. The more liberal the policies, the more likely a qualifier like say “to educate”, might appear in the mission statement. By contrast, a guarded institution with rigid access policies riddled with protocols, such as the US National Archives will have “to safeguard,” or “to protect” as their primary obligation. Within this spectrum, the physical, virtual, and intellectual accessibility of an institution’s archival collection can vary wildly, daunting a researcher in his or her quest for primary sources. This is especially true of moving image material where the variety of formats contained, playback machines needed, and licensing agreements add an extra layer of restrictive measure that can, depending on the institution’s size, create a convoluted, or even case-by-case set of policies. However, there are also consistencies that, when compartmentalized, the researcher can use as a map to finding the when, where, how, and how much of accessing archival material. This paper originally attempted to do just that by pitting the moving image access policies of two very different institutions: The La Guardia and Wagner Archives in the City University of New York (LGWA), and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian exhibit gallery in New York (NMAI). A series of unexpected setbacks, however, reminded me of an overlooked qualification, that of the archivist or librarian.

Methodology

Since the goal of this research project is to assess access policies as they apply to the general user, a general user this writer became. For both institutions, a mock research project was concocted and made contextual to the material available in that collection. From there, respective websites were scoured for missions statements and access guidelines; databases, if any, searched for relevant material to request; archivists called and/or email about the accessibility of the material found and, in once case the institution visited. I approached the staff at the National Museum of the American Indian as a student looking for moving image material to support a paper on public perceptions of Native Americans in the 1950s. For the La Guardia Archives, I wanted to know more about licensing policies, and emailed the archivist about using a piece of footage for a short documentary I was making about ice skating in New York City. Observations were recorded posthumously and categorized, as advised, into the following sections of Virtual, Physical, and Intellectual access.

Virtual

The New York branch of the National Museum of the American Indian, housed in the George Gustav Heye Center (GGHC), serves as a satellite exhibit and educational facility under the umbrella of the Smithsonian's flagship museum in Washington D.C. The two branches share a website that appears, on the surface, sectioned off accordingly. But for a researcher, navigating to the correct facility for contact falls short of straightforward. The page on the museum's "Film and Video Center," states material is available for on-site viewing by appointment. This was easily confused with the contact page for the Media Archives in the D.C. branch, the archivist of whom I mistakenly called.

The NMAI website is heavy with mostly marketing copy, but does offer a portal to a separate NMAI Collections Search database. The database is well designed - with the functionality to search within specified culture groups - but only contains information on ephemeral or photographic material, nothing on film or video. In general, access policies are undefined on the website, only that moving image material is viewable on-site at the Resource Center, a library-style facility open to the public, or at the Film and Video Center as previously stated. The Film and Video Center is largely a support hub for Native filmmakers to connect. The staff administers the Native Networks website where a separate policy appears: (Smithsonian Institution) The Film and Video Center does not lease or rent, but could “provide information,” on a specific film.

By contrast, the La Guardia and Wagner Archive, has their entire collection on a simple, searchable database. Of their nine collections - most pertaining to New York City Mayors, or Queens County history (the archive is located in the neighborhood of Long Island City in Queens) - five have moving image material. The database is searchable by video, a vast majority of which is stored in the VHS format. Metadata is fairly controlled, though not based on PBCore standards, and contains copyright information. Selected material is streamed through the website from a YouTube repository. My quest for material on ice skating yielded single result, one that also happened to be the only film reel in the archive: an 8mm home movie titled, “FILM OF ICE SKATING and NEWTOWN HIGH SCHOOL BY EDWARD YORK.” In the description is a disclaimer “Unable to transfer 8mm format for lack of in-house equipment.”

Physical

Unable to reach NMAI’s Film and Video Center to make an appointment, I turned attention to the material available in the museum’s Resource Center, “a interactive reference

library,” boasts the website, “museum staff are available to help with general requests about the museum and its exhibitions, as well as to assist with in-depth research utilizing the Centers’ outstanding collection of books, periodicals, audio CDs, DVDs, videos, and online databases and bibliographies.” After the Center twice, without response, I made a random visit.

NMAI is located in the Alexander Hamilton Customs House, a century-old architectural treasure in Lower Manhattan. Because of the building’s status as both government and historic, as well as its proximity to Ground Zero, security measures are tight. I entered the building on a Friday afternoon and was immediately asked by security to remove my shoes, belt, and send my bags through an x-Ray machine before crossing the threshold of a metal detector. Once in, friendly volunteers at the information desk informed me that the entire staff of the Resource Center was “setting up” for a conference that weekend and unavailable to help me access material.

Thus, I was not able view any of the content available at NMAI. According to the website, there are laptops and other playback machines available for you. Later, a librarian responded to an email I sent after I visited inquiring about a possible catalog I could browse, replying: “Let me know what subject/topic/culture area/tribe-nation you are interested in and I can tell you what we have.” I have yet to hear back about whether or not the collection contains content made in the 1950’s.

I contacted the archivist at LGWA the following week about viewing the 8mm ice skating film. He regretfully informed me that his projector had lost a belt, having acquired it in the first place to create an access copy. He did say that if I had a 8mm viewer that I was welcome to come to bring it the archives and view in their reading room. I tried for several days to retrieve a 8mm viewer but unable to in time for this paper. There was no access form to fill

out; the archive is small, with little traffic. They only keep paper-based track of loans leaving the site, which is hardly ever. He didn't have much to say about licensing as they have not licensed content to date. This is partly because much in their collection is not unique, often VHS copies of, say, local news report on Giuliani. Their archives are almost exclusively held there as part of CUNY curriculums, accessed only by teachers and students, if open to the public. He said he'd get back to me about licensing, but to-date, he hasn't.

Intellectual

Both the NMAI librarian and the NMAI website implied there are catalogs that exist within the organization and available for public browsing, including a pair of video catalogs of Native American films, last published in the 1980's. While I did not get a chance to view any in-house indexes or databases, it ended up being much more helpful for my mock project to simply view the streaming material that is available on the Smithsonian's main collection database site, operated by staff in the D.C. branch. The material is catalogued by collection and one can further search by "datasource," which appears to be a euphemism for the collection's official name. By searching through the "Human Studies Film Archives," datasource and filtering by date, I was able to find a host of streamed films made on reservations in the 1950's, exactly what I was looking for...and what the librarians at the New York branch could not even bother to direct me too.

Conclusion

Blame it on the specifics of my requests, or the scheduling mishaps, but I found through this case study that the archivist or librarian is not always prepared for surprises. The Resource Center at NMAI is less a library or an than it is an extension of the exhibition space. At the LGWA, an archive so local it rarely sends material off-site, the request for a film to license in a

short documentary was meant with a non-committal “I’ll get back to you.” These types of research facilities have un-defined access policies because their identity as a research facility is also undefined.

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