Share That Knowledge! Finding Strategies for Passing on Knowledge Across Generations of Archivists

Audiovisual archivists hold a special kind of knowledge about the collections they work with. An understanding of what is where, since when and why, what it is made of and how it is made. This knowledge is complex: it can be individual, is closely related to particular collections, is learned through years of experience, and connects and intertwines historical, organizational, and technical information with material handling skills. It is a type of knowledge that cannot all be taught in archival study programmes, nor written down in institutional databases or collection policies. Yet, it is of vital importance for an audiovisual archive and deserves as much attention as the preservation of audiovisual collections. How can the experience and comprehension of archivists with a long tenure at an institution be passed on to newcomers? How can a younger generation of archivists contribute with new knowledge?

These questions were explored in our presentation "Share that Knowledge! Finding Strategies for Passing on Knowledge Across Generations of Archivists" held at the 2018 FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives) symposium themed "Sharing", which took place at the Národní filmový archiv in Prague. The symposium was the right place to address and discuss this topic with colleagues from all over the world. In these dis-

cussions it became clear that most of us do recognize the importance of preserving and sharing the knowledge of archivists, but that there are very few concrete methods in place to facilitate this knowledge transfer in a strategic and systematic manner.

For this topic to receive greater attention, we called for action and asked fellow archivists to participate in a project that will research the current state of matters related to knowledge transfer within archives. By means of conducting research within the field, identifying the knowledge that we need to preserve and discerning the challenges of its transfer, we want to devise a plan and develop practical methods for knowledge transfer within audiovisual archiving institutions; concrete methods that can be employed by archivists and managers alike.

This written contribution will explain the focus of the project and outline its goals and objectives. The first part explains the components of the research, followed by a description of the research methodology. Then, the focus of the research subject itself will be explained in more depth to give a better understanding of the direction and intended outcomes of this research. Here we will focus on the expert knowledge and the challenges we encounter.

Researching an intangible form of heritage

The passing on of knowledge across generations of archivists within an institution is an essential part of the preservation of audiovisual heritage. Sustaining knowledge about a collection therefore belongs to an institution's preservation tasks. Archivists know the history of a collection, its organization, physical makeup and subject matter. While some areas of knowledge are easily recognizable, it is the tacit or intangible knowledge an archivist holds which cannot always be expressed clearly or written down. It is therefore much harder to pass on, as archivists often know more than they can tell (in line with philosopher Michael Polanyi's explanation of tacit knowing), particularly when it comes to predecessors with a long tenure at an institution.[1]

Within many archives there is a lack of continuity regarding knowledge transfer across generations, as it is not acknowledged and undertaken in a methodical manner. The main challenge lies in passing on the tacit forms of knowledge; knowledge that is personal in nature, is considered too sensitive to express, or comes so natural to someone that the value of the knowledge is not recognized. Challenges in knowledge transfer might be reinforced by other factors, such as organizational change, technological developments or a changing working culture in the context of audiovisual archiving. Institutions may have found their own individual methods of passing on knowledge, but not yet articulated and shared these methods through published research. Up until now, no attempt has been made to bring together professionals in order to engage in this crucial, yet largely unexplored topic.

At this point in time, we have gathered a group of seventeen motivated archivists from thirteen different institutions who will collectively dive into this study. The group consists of a wide variety of people of different generations, from various parts of the world and cultural backgrounds, working for small, large, government run or private collecting institutions. These archive affiliates will work together over the course of three years, from January 2019 until January 2022. The diversity of the working group will be reflected in the outcomes and the wide array of case-studies will make for strong comparisons.

The focus of the research will be on real-life examples; actual working practices within the field will be studied using methods of qualitative research, which will be based on an ethnographic approach, combined with grounded theory and action research. The research approach is largely inspired by the method of 'archival ethnography' as defined by Karen F. Gracy (associate professor at the School of Information at Kent State University).[2]

The research will focus on the knowledge of *audiovisual archivists*, a term used to indicate professionals engaged in audiovisual archiving in the broadest sense of the word. *Audiovisual archive* refers to an institution that collect and preserve audiovisual materials — be it a cinematheque, a national or regional archive, broadcasting institution, library, university, or a museum. Although this research will focus on and be conducted within the field of audiovisual archiving, the outcomes can be useful for related fields, such as for technical professions in film laboratories (audiovisual technicians whose knowledge is in danger of becoming obsolete) or managers and curators of audiovisual collections.

Research methodology

The focus of the research is working practices within audiovisual archives and in particular the process of transferring knowledge among col-

1) Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 4.
2) Karen F. Gracy, 'Documenting Communities of Practice: Making the Case for Archival Ethnography', *Archival Science,* vol. 4, no. 4 (2004), pp. 335–365.

leagues. Methods of qualitative research can be well used to study this process, because they are especially relevant for studying social interactions.[3] Furthermore, qualitative research has been a proven method of inquiry in knowledge management studies within other professional fields.

Karen F. Gracy developed a method of qualitative research she describes as 'archival ethnography': "a form of naturalistic inquiry which positions the researcher within an archival environment to gain the cultural perspective of those responsible for the creation, collection, care, and use of records."[4] This form of inquiry can be used to study a selected subject among a group of participants in relation to the social and cultural context and the particular archival setting. Archival ethnography aims at "uncovering and collecting data on tacit knowledge, that is, unstated practices and norms shared among community members," and can therefore be particularly helpful in studying forms of implicit knowledge and how this knowledge plays a role in the interaction among colleagues.[5]

Archival ethnography is based on the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork and grounded theory. Sociologist Kathy Charmaz explains grounded theory as "a way to learn about the worlds we study and a method for developing theories to understand them."[6] Through grounded theory, theory emerges from data. These data are collected in the field, by means of interviews and observations among other techniques. Parallel to the data collection, the findings are analysed, interpreted and coded, and theoretical concepts are developed. The outcomes of the qualitative research to be conducted in the audio-

visual archives will form the theoretical foundation for developing concrete strategies to be integrated in the working practice.

Along with formulating theory from the data, the theoretical outcomes and proposed strategies will need to be validated within the participating institutions. For this purpose, we will combine archival ethnographic methods with 'action research', in which theory and practice are brought together; theory is used for practical solutions.[7] Action research will be used as a way to validate theory, while at the same time it will be beneficial for the participating institutions; the inquiry will be a process of reflection upon their working practices, and the proposed methods will be subsequently tested to aid internal archival processes.

The qualitative methods will be used to define the expert knowledge of audiovisual archivists, to identify the challenges in transferring the expert knowledge of audiovisual archivists, to explore the methods of knowledge transfer within audiovisual archives that already exist and, finally, to formulate and disseminate successful strategies of knowledge transfer for audiovisual archives.

The things an archivist knows

What is the expert knowledge of an archivist? And why is this knowledge important for the preservation of audiovisual collections? The following broadly defined areas of knowledge and their importance for the practice of archiving will be explored in depth:

History of collection. Within each institution, the history of how a collection was formed pro-

3) Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2006).

4) Gracy, 'Documenting Communities of Practice: Making the Case for Archival Ethnography', p. 337.

5) Ibid., p. 336.

6) Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), p. 10.

7) Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research, participative inquiry and practice* (Los Angeles, CA, and London: SAGE, 2008), p. 4.

vides an understanding of its current state. This includes information regarding acquisitions, donor relationships and provenance of materials, as well as sensitive information that has been kept internal and is part of an unofficial history. By giving context to why and how past decisions were made, this knowledge provides historical awareness and helps sustain the identity of an institution, which is essential for future decisions.

Organization of collection. The way in which a collection is managed is often unique to a particular organization and usually built upon a complex series of past decisions. This includes systems of locating, cataloguing and identifying collection objects, as well as ways in which access is provided. Understanding of how a collection is organized helps to avoid redundancies, to prevent repeating past mistakes and to minimize conflicting strategies. When an archive wishes to improve its organizational scheme, this knowledge forms a valuable background.

Physical makeup of collection. Audiovisual archives consist of a variety of different media, and the type of material is often specific to its intent as a collecting institution. This area of knowledge encompasses identification and handling of materials, methods of audiovisual production techniques (which are often regionally specific), as well as knowledge about equipment, appropriate workflows, and proper preservation environments of an organization. Technical knowledge and practical expertise, consisting of both general as well as collection-specific knowledge, should be passed on in order to inform decisions related to preservation.

Subject matter of collection. Through years of experience in working with collection objects, an archivist builds up an invaluable base of knowledge about the subject matter of a collection, i.e. the content of the collected material. This knowl-

edge is characterized by a complex network of conceptual associations and connections, and historical knowledge related. It is important to sustain this information within an organization because it provides a point of entry to a collection, through which it can be used and understood. This type of knowledge is difficult to write down or transfer to a database because it is personal in nature.

If no conscious attempt is made to pass on these various types of knowledge to the next generation, there is a good chance that this knowledge will disappear when people leave or retire from their position.

The challenges

The research will explore and articulate what obstructs knowledge transfer within the field of audiovisual archiving. Defining these challenges will give an idea of the conditions necessary for sharing knowledge. The following identified issues will be explored in more depth:

Recognition and transfer of tacit knowledge. One of the most obvious challenges in knowledge transfer relates to an archivist's inability to recognize the importance of the tacit knowledge they possess and to articulate it. They might not be aware of the relevance of their knowledge and the importance of sharing it.

Generational differences. Generational differences can stand in the way of successfully passing on knowledge. For example, our predecessors and colleagues mostly learned by doing and self-teaching, while nowadays we have more opportunities to learn through studying. Older generations often had a stable job for years, while the younger generation tends to shift jobs more regularly. These generational differences in the worst cases can lead to misunderstandings and atti-

tudes of hubris, lack of trust, and a lack of patience.

Ongoing technological developments. Continuous changes in the technology of audiovisual production and distribution, as well as archiving, reinforce generational differences. For instance, an archivist who starts their career today has fewer possibilities to acquire practical knowledge concerning analogue film and laboratory techniques. At the same time, it might be difficult for archivists who were 'raised analogue' to become fluent in the use of advanced digital tools. This can create a situation where a newcomer might not have enough background to understand technical specifics of holdings in a collection, while a long-term archivist may find it difficult to accept new technological developments. When these differences in focus and knowledge among staff members are not bridged, they can disrupt the workflow and sharing of information.

Gatekeeping. Another issue that should be addressed is the phenomenon of archivists who have developed a protective attitude towards the collection and knowledge related to it. This attitude stems from caring for a collection, which can develop into being perhaps too protective. It makes certain knowledge exclusive, which in turn makes it difficult to share.

Organizational changes. The consequences of organizational changes can also have an impact on the passing on knowledge transfer. For example, in the case of the Austrian Film Museum, rapid organizational growth led to a structure and division of work significantly different from how it was previously. This in turn made it difficult for a long-term archivist to pass on her knowledge to the right person. A high staff turnover contributes to these challenges as well. Additionally, when there is no acknowledgement of transferring knowledge within an organization as a whole, i.e. on the level of the management; this

poses a challenge for the long-term maintenance of knowledge.

Changing archival standards. Over time, archival standards have changed and have been adjusted. For example, in the past it might not have been equally important to register provenance information when materials were accessioned in the collection. Present-day standards might contrast with those of the past, and if there is no commonly shared understanding for these changes, this might lead to inconsistent practices of archiving.

It becomes apparent that the unique character of a collection environment will strongly influence the challenges that arise. Therefore, the critical case-studies will specifically address the context of a particular archiving institution, such as the unique characteristics of an organization and its history. This wide range of information about the circumstances of each working environment must be taken into account when developing strategies — only in this way are we able to ensure that the strategies can be adopted by different types of audiovisual archives.

Strategies and methods of knowledge transfer

Every audiovisual archive has its own existing ways of passing on knowledge. In some cases, these methods are not part of a conscious strategy, but instead might have been developed intuitively and have an informal character, such as learning by doing within the day-to-day archival processes. Others show a more formalised and active approach to transferring knowledge, such as wide-ranging and detailed methods of consultation, mentoring, and holding workshops. For example, in some places experienced professionals or former employees are invited to teach by means of hands-on sessions. The necessary requirement for such methods is the creation of

a learning environment in which everyone involved must be willing to exchange knowledge.

Another method of collecting different perspectives and reflections on the history of an organization is through oral history programmes.[8] This can be a useful method for sustaining long-term preservation of knowledge within a collection, as oral histories capture important elements of the collection's past that might otherwise remain undocumented. One can gather a lot of unfiltered information that seems important to an individual archivist but has never been verbalized and recognized as an integral part of a collection's history.

Intended results and afterlife

The project aims at contributing to and helping professionals from the wider archival community, including those of different generations, positions in an archive, and most importantly, professionals working in institutions with limited resources and a lower profile. In order to reach a large number of professionals, the final report of the research and methods will be published in print and will be accessible via an online platform. The printed publication will be free of charge for audiovisual archives and freely accessible to all via the project website, as well as the websites of institutions and overarching organizations supporting the project, such as the Co-ordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (CCAAA) and FIAF. The handbook will remain available online after the project is finished in 2022. Besides that, we will reach out to training courses and master programmes for audiovisual archiving and the FIAF Training and Outreach Programme to see how the outcomes can be integrated with curricula and how pro-

spective professionals can be reached. We also plan to present the outcomes through a dedicated symposium.

This project is an initiative of the Austrian Film Museum and Slovenska kinoteka and a working group that constitutes of colleagues from the following institutions: Akademski Filmski Centar - Dom kulture Studentski grad (Serbia), BFI (UK), Cinémathèque québécoise (Canada), Cineteca Nacional de México (Mexico), Imperial War Museum (UK), J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archives University of Ghana (Ghana), Národní filmový archiv (Czech Republic), National Film and Sound Archive (Australia), National Film Archive India (India), Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (The Netherlands) and UCLA (USA). Karen F. Gracy (associate professor at the School of Information of Kent State University) will participate as an advising researcher.

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8)   Such as employed by Ray Edmondson in his study of the National Film and Television Archive in Australia in: Ray Edmondson, 'National Film and Sound Archive: the quest for identity: factors shaping the uneven development of a cultural institution' (Dissertation: University of Canberra, 2011).