

What Makes a Good Archive?

Edwin van Huis, XPEX Experience Experts, Amsterdam

Most of you who read this journal work in archives. Most of you are professionals, who have been working in this field for several years. And during that period you must have thought about this issue more or less on a daily basis. Maybe not consciously, but it is behind all the decisions that you make in your work: what makes a good archive?

For more than 12 years I have led the national audiovisual archive in the Netherlands and I was active in the international archive community. That period has given me ample time to think about this question as well. In this article I will try to answer it.

Thinking about the question “what makes a good archive” the things that pop into our mind first are aspects of the archive itself. A good archive is an archive with a “unique collection”, with an “expert staff”, with “clever systems” and with “state of the art facilities”. This is because we tend to look at the archive from the inside out. But what if we look at the stakeholders outside the archive. What would be the answers if we were not to ask you, archivists, but the general public, or schoolteachers, or politicians this question?

Creative destruction

Let me bring in another dimension: time. Because time has a tendency to change the answer to many questions.

Are you familiar with the term creative destruction? The Austrian economist Schumpeter used this term to describe the process of transformation that accompanies radical innovation. It means that the new does not only replace the old but also will destroy it - like in the 1970 and '80s, when supermarkets wiped out the small bakeries and grocery shops that crowded our cities; like MP3 is bringing the record companies down. Examples are everywhere when you look. Creative destruction also predicts that no institution, no company, however powerful, will eventually be able to survive the forces of innovation without adapting.

Digitisation, Internet, mobile, they are the driving forces behind creative destruction nowadays. Look at the way people listen to music, see how big newspapers are going under, see how no kid ever seems to read a book any more, see how games are already a bigger economic market than film. Schumpeter's ideas were at first heavily criticised. When he launched them, in the 1940s, no one could believe that the big corporations, which were just coming up in those decades, would ever cease to exist. Now we know that even General Motors can go under. And so can archives, believe it or not. The world is changing, evolving, and we will have to evolve with it or become extinct. Digitization will change the world and it will change our world. It will change the way people look at archives, and it will change what people expect of archives.

Change

I hope I do not have to debate that digitization has changed the world. Look at the technology that has entered our homes in the last two decades - it is enormous.

When I was a kid, and I did not want to eat the food on my plate, I was punished by my parents by sending me to my room. When I today tell my son to go to his room he runs upstairs before I can finish my sentence. He has got PlayStation, Xbox, MSN, World of War Craft, YouTube, etc. There is more technology in his room than there is in the rest of the house. So the only punishment he is really afraid of is when we say: stay at the table and talk to your parents.

The way people respond to change is always the same: first we resist it, then we try to assimilate the changes into our existing operations. We try to adapt new technologies without changing anything else. For example: the first cars that were made looked exactly

like carriages, only the horse was missing. In archives it is no different. First we quarrel for a while about digitization, claiming that analogue is better. When time moves on and there is no choice, we quarrel over which digital formats are good enough to use. In the end we change, reluctantly, everything that is analogue to digital, and we hope everything else will stay the same. But this time it will not. This change in technology comes with a change of paradigm. What we need to do, is find out what the nature of that change is. It is not digitization itself. Digitization has made it possible, it has opened the gate, it has set the monster loose. What we have to ask ourselves is: what is the very nature of the innovation that drives today's creative destruction?

Imagine you are a baker with a shop. In the good old days everyone would visit you if they needed bread. They would applaud your skills as a baker and pay a decent price. Now the supermarket has opened up around the corner and sells incredibly cheap bread. And everyone goes there, even if it is not as good as yours. What will you do? What can you do? Sit still and complain your bread tastes so much better?

For archives it is not that different. Our society, and the position of the archive in it, has transcended from a professional centred universe into a universe of content driven by laymen. To sum it up in a few words, in the old days you had the content and you had the key to the content. You had the bread and you had the shop. If anyone wanted it, they would have to come to you. Now, if you cannot show your content on the web, your customers will go elsewhere. They will not come to you to find out what it is you keep in your vaults, they will search the big supermarket called "The Web" and settle for someone else's content instead. Even if that content is not half as good as yours.

This is not the first big change in cultural history. But it is the first for AV archives, and that makes it difficult to adjust. But maybe we can also learn from the past.

Wunderkammer

Let me take you back to the days of the wunderkammer. As you may remember from your history lessons, a wunderkammer is a collection: a collection of natural artefacts, art, anthropological objects, etc. In the wunderkammer you would find the wonders of art and the wonders of nature, like fossils, shells, bones, feathers, plants, or a mermaid.



The wunderkammer is a product of the European renaissance. The reasons for its origin are complex, but you could say they show how mankind was slowly getting a grip on the world and its miracles, a domain that was till then monopolised by the church. It was a tribute to those wonders, but also a means to show the wealth and knowledge of the owner. Because the owner knew what it all was, and, on top of that, could classify it.

Classification is the real wonder of the wunderkammer. The renaissance's classification is for us difficult to understand, but nonetheless very clever and complex for those early days. Every object in the wunderkammer would be given a meaning. Now today that meaning

is often a lot more intriguing than the object itself. For instance, in many collections you could find sepia shell, the bone of a squid. It is that white thing that we hang in the cage of a parakeet. In those days it was still a mystery what it was. In one collection it would figure as a symbol for the sea, for Atlantis, or Neptune; in another, as an example of a soft stone, exhibited next to granite as an example of a hard stone. There was even a collection where this object was exhibited as a bone from the foot of a huge manlike creature that only had one leg with a very big foot, on which it could run very fast. Here is a picture of this creature from a 13th century book. For its afternoon nap it would rest in the shade of that enormous foot in the melting sun of Asia.



Wunderkammer were prestigious for the owners. For an emperor it was a must-have, and he would hire explorers and scientists to compile it. The biggest wunderkammer ever was that of Rudolf II of Habsburg in Prague. Rudolf loved the combination of art and nature: gold-rimmed shells, bouquets of real flowers cast in silver and after that decorated hyper-realistically to the extent that you could not see the difference with real flowers; clocks that launched a real bird when they struck the hour, etc. Rudolf himself was a technician and he constructed several clocks and planetaria with great ingenuity, and the most precious materials. But his wunderkammer lacked order and logic. He bought everything the treasury could support and more. Rudolf constructed what you could call a data-cloud without logical connections. His wonder was in the objects, not in the classification.

The modern archive

The modern archivist has come a long way. Still, like Rudolf, he is the only one who is in the position to give a meaning to an object. He has gone through a long training to do so, and he uses internationally accepted classification rules. In the archive, objects are categorised and subcategorised, tying their meaning to one interpretation and cutting them loose from other relations. In doing so, we usually concentrate on our specialist users. They understand and applaud our work. But most objects will have many, many meanings and information to give, and can easily have relations with many different user groups. Do we take them seriously enough? Remember, the wonder of the wunderkammer was not in the objects, it was in the relations!

Let us now go back to the beginning of this article. We have all these stakeholders who want and expect something from your archive: schools, universities, the general public, to name the most obvious. Do you give them what they want? Schools want footage that they can use in the classroom instead of their textbook. What they look for is very specific; it must fit into the curriculum exactly. Universities want footage that drills deep into one subject. It is not specific but they want everything, even if it is remotely related to the subject. The public wants to see that one piece of footage where mum took part in that game show. And dad wants to see that one soccer match again. And that childrens' program, what's its name? And the specialist? The specialist wants that everything is available at any time at the highest possible quality.

So let's go back to a previous question. What is the driving force behind the creative destruction we face today? In my view it is the power shift. The power shift from sellers to buyers, from professionals to consumers.

There is a very interesting book, called: "What would Google do?" by Jeff Jarvis. If you have not read it, you should do so. It gives a great insight in the company that understands our times better than anyone. These points, a little bit adapted for archives, but not much, were taken from Jarvis's book:

- We have shifted from an economy based on scarcity of content to one based on abundance. The control of content or its distribution will no longer guarantee clients. Owning archives, specialists, recordings, or even intellectual property is no longer the key to success. Openness is.
- The mass market is dead, replaced by the mass of niches.
- Markets are conversations; that means the skill in any organization no longer is marketing, but conversing.
- Enabling users to collaborate with you – in cataloging records, in creating new uses, in distributing your assets, and supporting your archive – is what counts nowadays.
- Link to others, become part of a network; go where your users are.
- If you're not on the web, you won't be found.

There is another list that is of interest to us. It is from Google itself. Now, I know that a lot of people, especially cultural professionals, do not like Google. They don't trust Google, because Google gets on our turf. Well, even if they are right, it won't hurt anyone to learn from what they did. Did you ever surf to the Google home site? There is a list that is called: "Ten points Google has found to be true". I picked two points out of that list for you to consider:

- It's best to do one thing really, really well.
- Focus on the users and all else will follow.

So the debate about the future and the value of archives is not about formats, about 2K or 4K or about metadata standards. It is about the user. People love archives. They start making archives themselves immediately after you give them the tools. They built YouTube, the largest AV archive in the world, in a matter of years. They built enormous audio archives. They don't mind that MP3 is a low quality format, and they'll watch anything in low bandwidth. There is an audience out there of billions, and they love what we have to offer; if they could get their hands on it. A good archive understands its users and makes contact with them.

The collections that I was managing in Holland were at first solely aimed at our professional clients, in our case the broadcasters. But the programs we kept were valuable for schools and students as well, and for the individual member of the public who is searching for an old show or footage of the town where he was born. In many cases, our catalogue, which was aimed at professionals, was not very helpful in finding the right footage for schoolteachers, students or the general public. We understood that to successfully open our collections up to these user groups, we would have to add meaning to our catalogues and establish new relations between our objects and these users.

User groups all have different ways of searching and accessing objects. The meaning the objects have for a new group of users is often different from the professional use. For an archivist it is not easy to look at his collections with the eyes of different groups, to see the value and meaning it has to them. It is not self-evident what the meaning of archive-materials is for different groups and individuals. So to be successful we have to use their input.

For the use in schools in Holland, for instance, we set up a broadband service delivering thousands of programs to the schools. To tie the content to the school curriculum, and even to the books and chapters they used, we had a group of educational documentalists that edited our catalogue entries to make them suitable for use in the classrooms and