AMIA the association of moving image archivists

Cataloging and Metadata Committee

AMIA Compendium of Moving Image Cataloging Practice (2001)
Available to order from the Society of American Archivists

What makes the AMIA Compendium of Moving Image Cataloging Practice unique? This resource fills an inadvertent gap in existing archival literature. By presenting a snapshot in time of the cataloging practices of 27 diverse institutions, this authoritative work offers a range of suggested solutions to cataloging problems unique to moving images. The diverse collection of institutions examined includes historical societies, university archives, broadcast organizations, museums and subject-specialized collections. Both MARC and non-MARC institutions are represented as well as formats including television, film and video.

(more below)

Introduction
Because there are no fieldwide standards carved in stone, and because of the tremendous diversity in the types of institutions that have a need to catalog moving images, catalogers have often had to "reinvent the wheel" and come up with new solutions to old problems. Many moving image catalogers have spent great quantities of time and mental effort unraveling cataloging problems for which solutions already existed. There was simply no awareness of other methods for handling problems such as dealing with different versions of a work or different production and broadcast/release dates. That is the reason for the creation of this work. Rather than hand down a set of ordained standards that might only apply to a certain section of the vast and various institutions and collections that make up Association of Moving Image Archivists membership and the moving image archival field in general, the Compendium is meant to present a series of solutions from which institutions may choose the solution that is the most comfortable fit for their holdings. The Compendium can serve as a source of options for moving image catalogers and a touchstone for discussion. Additionally, it is very much hoped that this work will generate discussion concerning the cataloging of moving image materials for some time to come.

The Participants
With the Compendium, every attempt has been made to create a document that included a wide variety of institutions, collections and cataloging practices in order to be as useful and all-encompassing as possible. Nearly half of the institutions contacted agreed to participate. The resulting group of 27 represents a good blend of MARC and non-MARC users, and its great diversity ensured that the Compendium would include a wide range of cataloging practices.

Both principal areas of moving image cataloging – television and film – are well represented within the group, as are a range of formats. The majority of respondents are academic or educational in nature, though government archives, a historical society, an independent non-profit moving image archive, an institution with a specialty in stock footage, and quite a few broadcast organizations count among the 27. This is also a diverse group thematically. Collections comprise Hollywood feature films and Holocaust
testimonies, regional footage and political commercials, the best of public television programming and films focusing on health issues such as syphilis. Various genres and forms include (but are not limited to) video art, news programs, oral histories, and feature films. It is also an international group, with institutions in Australia, Canada, Israel, and the United Kingdom all kindly agreeing to participate.

The Process
The genesis of this project can be found in several surveys carried out by AMIA’s Cataloging and Documentation Committee in the early 1990s, in particular, the 1994 distribution of several genre-specific surveys to the moving image cataloging community related to the revision of Archival Moving Image Materials: A Cataloging Manual (AMIM) by Wendy White-Hensen. During this project, Linda Tadic and Linda Elkins were struck by the responses that they received. Many moving image archivists seemed to be working alone, with few opportunities to discuss or debate the issues and problems unique to the cataloging of moving image materials and lacking any sort of cataloging standards. Out of this sprang the desire to discover what catalogers at various institutions did in terms of practice, with the hopes of collecting examples of solutions to various thorny cataloging problems into a publication. This valuable resource would not compete with the revised AMIM, but instead would complement it.

In 1996, Linda Tadic turned her vision for this project into action. As chair of the Subcommittee of the Compendium of Cataloging Practice, she drove the project forward, with Linda Elkins serving as one of its most dedicated and hard-working supporters. The first step was to design a thorough and detailed 78-question survey by heavily modifying the survey that had served as the basis for the revision of AMIM in 1995. The next step was to call for volunteers to create a subcommittee at AMIA’s convention, when the editor of this work, Abigail Leab Martin, entered the picture.

The subcommittee immediately began contacting institutions to urge them to participate in the project, and initial surveys went out in March of 1997 to those who did. As the surveys returned over the course of the summer, the writing began. Each committee member was responsible for creating a certain number of sections, and by the fall of 1998, a sizable partially complete draft was available. Meanwhile, Linda Tadic, now charged with the demanding duties of the AMIA presidency, passed the project leadership to Abigail Leab Martin at the 1998 AMIA conference in Miami. At the same time, Amy Wood and Christine Lee joined the team and made their invaluable contributions.

Because so much time had passed since the initial data gathering in 1997, it rapidly became clear that an updating of the data was necessary. Changes had obviously been made in terms of practice, procedure, and technology over the past two years. After contacting the various institutions by phone to determine their willingness to review and update their original answers, copies of the initial surveys were returned for updating to 23 of the 25 institutions then taking part. The initial data from the two institutions, the Art Gallery of Ontario and Concordia University Visual Media Resources, that could not participate have also been included and noted as coming from the 1997 survey.

Once all of the updated surveys were returned, the massive revisions to the text that were both required and crucial began. Quite a few institutions had made changes in a variety of areas including hardware, software, format, and even personnel. These revisions also included the incorporation of data from new respondents ScreenSound Australia and the San Francisco State University Library.
A semifinal draft, complete with revisions and appendices, was presented to the members of the Cataloging and Documentation Committee at the AMIA conference in Montreal in winter 1999. The draft was then posted to the Web to make it available for additional commentary. Members responded, and their comments and emendations were then incorporated into the body of the work. With that, the Compendium reached this final form.

The Product
The Compendium follows closely the format of the survey. Respondents’ answers have been analyzed and, where possible, quantified in table form. In addition, select examples of records formats have been reproduced in whole or part to illustrate the solutions provided for the question at hand. The examples within the text are presented in alphabetical order by institution unless the issue at hand divides up into obvious trends or groupings. In that case, the examples are presented within trends in alphabetical order.

In each example, just enough of it is provided to demonstrate how the cataloging problem at hand is dealt with, though often a few extra lines are included in order to give the correct context and flavor of the institution’s cataloging. Generally this context is given via the inclusion of the title field as well as some kind of explanatory fields (such as a note or summary field) if necessary. The sections of the example that are crucial to the solution of the cataloging issue are always presented in boldface to draw the reader’s attention to them. Every example in the Compendium is presented in its full glory and format in Appendix E online, which is posted on the AMIA Web site at www.amianet.org. Rather than create a work that is thousands of pages long due to the repetition of full and lengthy cataloging records, only the pertinent bits related to the question at hand are presented within the text. As there is a pointer above each example in the text to lead the reader back from the partial example in the text to the full example in Appendix E, it is hoped the more curious reader will actually follow it to AMIA’s Web site to see the original spacing, content and formatting of the example. The examples have been used with the permission of the institutions in question.

The partial portions of examples that appear in the text to illustrate cataloging questions appear only in text form. This is of particular relevance with regard to institutions such as the Political Communication Center and ScreenSound Australia. Both of these institutions scanned in examples featuring computer screens. As such, their examples were difficult to reproduce in the text itself. For actual displays of the records (as well as portions of cataloging manuals and explanatory documents in some cases), Appendix E should be consulted on the AMIA Web site. Within the appendix, the examples have been broken up alphabetically by institution. Thus, the American Heritage Center is E-1, Archive Films E-2 and so on down the line through Wesleyan Cinema Archives. Therefore the second example in Appendix E concerning the American Heritage Center would be designated "E-1-2," meaning the second example in Appendix E, section 1. The portion of the example appearing in the text would indeed refer the reader to the "E-1-2" link in the appendix online. It is the same for all examples. Finally, Appendix A, an overview of the extensive overall descriptions of the participating institutions, should also be browsed in print or online.

All examples for MARC have been made standard and as consistent as possible with regard to spacing and delimiter symbols. (A "#" has been used as the delimiter symbol of choice.) The reasoning behind this was to increase the readability of the MARC examples, especially for those previously unfamiliar with MARC. Examples appear with their original spacing and delimiter symbols in Appendix E.
MARC, for those new to the term, stands for MArchine Readable Cataloging. It refers to a method of recording bibliographic information with the help of a computer. MARC is a standard that guides just how data should be structured and presented so that it may be exchanged between computer systems. Readers not familiar with MARC might wish to refer immediately to Appendix D, which thoughtfully discusses and explains the subject. Appendix D will provide a MARC novice with a general idea of record structure and vocabulary, something which would come in useful before attempting to decipher the MARC-formatted examples.

It is hoped that this document, a gathering of the wisdom and work of those toiling at the participating institutions, will be as useful to moving image catalogers as it was fascinating and challenging to compile and create. The Compendium is a snapshot in time. It demonstrates how, in the spring of 1999, during a period of great technological change, various institutions dealt with their common cataloging issues. With technology changing so rapidly, the Compendium cannot be a cure-all; indeed many more changes have likely taken place at each of the institutions since they submitted those revisions. However, at a time when so many institutions are in transition – some mounting their catalogs on the World Wide Web and others migrating their records from one system to another – such a frame of reference should be particularly useful. Hopefully, this work will allow the catalogers of moving images to cease reinventing the wheel and move forward through their work with clarity, consistency, and confidence.