

Review of Moving Image and Sound Collections for Archivists

Jeffrey Paul Thompson
jpthompson5000@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives>

Recommended Citation

Thompson, Jeffrey Paul () "Review of Moving Image and Sound Collections for Archivists," *Journal of Western Archives*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol9/iss1/3>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Western Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact dylan.burns@usu.edu.



Review of *Moving Image and Sound Collections for Archivists*

By Anthony Cocciolo. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2017.
218 pp. Softcover. \$69.99. ISBN: 978-0-931828-93-5

Once upon a time, an archivist might have been able to spend his or her entire career without ever having to deal with anything but paper, but those days are now long gone. Like it or not, at some point all archivists will have to deal with audiovisual material. Some archivists might work in archives that consist exclusively of audiovisual content, but most will probably encounter such material as part of manuscript collections or as random stand-alone items. Whatever the situation may be, like the onslaught of digital records, the archivist is often faced with the question of “What do I do with this stuff?” A primary problem is that archives education is still predominantly focused on paper with little, if any, emphasis given to other media. (As an example, I was once in a class taught by a book conservator whose advice on how to deal with nitrate film was simply to copy and destroy—which was exactly opposite to the instruction in my film preservation class!) A second problem is the fact that literature on audiovisual archiving is not always easy to find or reliable, especially for the novice archivist. A third problem is the fact that many once-ubiquitous audiovisual formats are now mostly obsolete, inasmuch that younger archivists might not even recognize an 8-track tape or a 16 mm film let alone more obscure formats like magnetic wire.

The Society of American Archivists is trying to address these problems faced by the practicing archivist by publishing Anthony Cocciolo’s *Moving Image and Sound Collections for Archivists*. Cocciolo comes to the archives field with an undergraduate degree in computer science from the University of California, Riverside and a doctorate in “Communications, Media, and Learning Technologies Design” from Teachers College, Columbia University. He began his career in 2002 as the Head of Technology of the Edlab and Gottesman Libraries at Teachers College at Columbia. In 2009, he was hired at Pratt Institute School of Information where he is currently an associate professor. He teaches courses on archives management; appraisal, acquisition and access; and projects in digital and audiovisual archives. He has consistently published articles and presented at several conferences mostly focused on digital records and digital preservation issues. This is his first book.

As the title indicates, *Moving Image* is written as a guide for archivists dealing with audiovisual materials. Not surprisingly, due to the author’s background, the book also deals extensively with digital records and storage. The book is a basic introduction and, admittedly, is not an in-depth treatise. It is comprised of eleven chapters divided into two parts. Part One (chapters 1-6) is focused on general archival

principles and how they apply to audiovisual materials. Cocciolo spends a chapter each on appraisal; accessioning, arrangement and description; legal and ethical issues; digital preservation and storage; access and outreach; and donor relations. Although he provides a good overview on these topics, his discussion is fairly standard and I was surprised that this section took up half of the book since these are concepts familiar to most archivists. After reading the book, I think more space could have been dedicated to the topics in Part Two. That said, Cocciolo does make some salient observations about how audiovisual collections need to be treated differently from paper-based archives. For example, in regards to appraisal he argues that not only is it important for an archivist to decide what audiovisual material to retain but it's also important to decide which format(s) will be retained for preservation and access purposes (the original master or a digital derivative copy, etc.). Another example is his assertion that item-level description is crucial for providing access, determining reformatting needs, budgeting, and acquiring equipment. This is, of course, a stark departure from the reigning MPLP philosophy, but his reasoning is convincing.

One informative feature of Part One is the use of case studies from archival institutions showing how they have managed aspects of their audiovisual collections. Cocciolo conducted original interviews with current practitioners like Christina Zamon at Emerson College who describes how she handled the appraisal of her audiovisual collection and Lisa Lobdell, archivist at the Great American Songbook Foundation, who discusses how she reformatted fragile audio recordings using grant funds and an outside vendor. As all archives have different collections, needs, and resources, these case studies provide some real-life examples that can be helpful to archivists who are trying to assess what to do with their own collections.

Part Two of the book (chapters 7-11) focuses on dealing with specific audiovisual formats and is definitely the strongest part of the book and of the most interest to archivists. Cocciolo spends a chapter each on the following media: audio, film, analog video, digital video, and complex media (computer software, CD-ROMs, etc.). For each chapter, he provides short histories and technical characteristics of the formats; photographs for identification; storage recommendations; and digital reformatting strategies. Scattered throughout, he also provides some helpful tips, like how to remove tabs from cassette tapes so they can't be recorded over. As with Part One, much of this information is available elsewhere (see www.ObsoleteMedia.org, for example), but Cocciolo does present a basic and concise presentation on these media formats.

The histories and technical information for the various formats presented at the beginning of each of the chapters in Part Two are brief but adequate and informative. Cocciolo provides good overviews for all of the significant formats from wax cylinders to MP4 digital files. He discusses how they came about, the dates of introduction, when they flourished, which companies created them, and how and by whom they were predominantly used. He also includes specific information about technical characteristics for the formats like the material used for film bases and how much

content can be stored on a compact disc. I think the information provided for the analog/digital video formats is particularly valuable because so many of those were only used by professionals and had short life spans and, hence, are not well-known to the general public. His discussion of electronic and digital media is equally informative. For an archivist who knows little or nothing about audiovisual formats, these chapters provide a great starting point to become familiar with them.

In addition to the histories and technical information, Cocciolo also provides photographs of the various formats. In general, these will be very helpful for archivists trying to identify what is in their collections. However, older formats and playback equipment are not as well represented as those of newer media. For example, there is only one image of a sound disc (a 33 1/3 vinyl LP) and yet there are so many different disc formats (16, 45, 78 rpms) and material types (shellac, acetate) that an archivist might come across that should have been included. In addition, more pictures for identifying deteriorating media (there is only one) like vinegar syndrome or sticky-shed syndrome could have been included since that is a major issue facing archivists.

As good as the histories and technical information are, the discussions concerning storage recommendations could be more robust. The author discusses preferred environmental conditions (temperature and humidity) for each format but gives few recommendations on storage, housing and enclosures. I think most archivists would appreciate knowing what the best practices are for storing these materials, like should reel-to-reel tapes be stored horizontally or vertically, or what kind of sleeves are recommended for sound discs.

Cocciolo is a big proponent of digital reformatting and he discusses this repeatedly throughout the text. He begins this discussion in Chapter 4 when discussing digital preservation and picks up again when discussing specific formats in the Part Two. As mentioned, with his background, his discussion is well-informed. He provides in-depth technical data and advice on how to perform migrations of media as well as recommending under what circumstances an archivist might want to consult an outside vendor. He also provides some detailed examples of the work he has done with his students for small, non-profit archives in their efforts to preserve audiovisual content with meager resources.

A bonus feature of Cocciolo's book is the 14-page glossary. He has supplied definitions for all of the formats as well as the technical and archival terms he uses in the book, like "DVCAM" and "Mutoscope." This will prove a handy reference for the archivist who is just beginning to deal with audiovisual material and can't keep the acronyms and technical jargon straight.

Another great asset of the book is the extensive bibliography. Cocciolo has documented much of the academic literature on audiovisual materials to provide a resource for exploring more on the subject. For the more experienced audiovisual archivist, the bibliography will probably be the most important and useful information found in the book.

Moving Image and Sound Collections for Archivists provides a good, basic introduction to handling audiovisual materials in an archive. The author extensively discusses digital issues and certainly could have added “digital” to the title to broaden the book’s appeal. Most of the information is available elsewhere but it is convenient to have the basics available in one volume from a trusted source. The information on general archival principles in Part One is probably familiar to most archivists but could provide some helpful insights. Part Two provides histories, pictures, and descriptions that are good resources for the identification, appraisal, and care of all kinds of audiovisual formats and could have been expanded to include more information. In addition, the glossary and bibliography are helpful reference sources. All in all, this is a solid introductory text for the novice audiovisual archivist.

Jeffrey Paul Thompson
Archivist
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-
day Saints
Salt Lake City, Utah