Collections in Transition: Brock Silversides and the Access Revolution at Media Commons

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Abstract

In 2008 the University of Toronto Libraries began its renewal and expansion plan for Robarts Library. As part of this revitalization, Media Commons is getting a radical makeover. To find out more about the changes happening at Media Commons, I interviewed its director, Brock Silversides, who not only manages an impressive circulating audio-visual library, but is also building an exceptionally rich archive of material from a variety of disciplines, including broadcasting, film, animation, advertising, music, photography and acting. In addition to his responsibilities to the library, Mr. Silversides has curated twenty-five exhibitions, written twelve books and more than forty-five articles. He is also highly sought-after as an appraiser of audio-visual archival material across Canada, and teaches courses on managing audio-visual materials for the University of Toronto and Ryerson University.

Tim Neufeldt: What is happening at Media Commons with the renovations?

Brock Silversides: Media Commons is undergoing a total renewal as part of the Robarts Library Revitalization project. Thanks to generous donations from the Ontario government and the Morrison family, Media Commons – along with other parts of the
library – is getting a radical overhaul. When finished it will be approximately 1.5 times the size of the original space. It will also have a new service desk, and new screening rooms that are fully sound proofed, more comfortable, and with tiered seating and a projection booth.

There will also be significantly more space for students, including study carrels and tables that will be open twenty-four hours a day, though Media Commons will not necessarily be providing service during that whole time. The renovation plans also include three small screening rooms for groups of four to five people. These study rooms are really quite nice, since a lot of people are actually watching the productions we have and talking about them amongst themselves. In our older facilities there was no space for this, so people were discussing the films in the open area, which was quite loud and very distracting for other patrons.

Another important change is that we will also have an archival reading room, as well as a room for the playback of obsolete audio and video formats. We have made a point over the last four years to find and acquire playback machines that can handle all the various formats, which as you know are constantly – and rapidly – changing. In our archive we have every known format, and we have to access them both for our researchers as well as for arrangement, description and cataloguing, and of course dubbing. Most of our archival holdings are in the cold storage vault or in the Downsview storage facility and people will have to order things to be brought over to the archival reading room. So there will be a short delay, maybe 24 hours before they can access it.

T: Who is your target audience for the new space?

B: Our target audience has not changed. It is always the university community: faculty, students, and staff. Of course we do open ourselves up to researchers from other academic institutions. We are also open to the general public, and they do use us, though not that much. But first and foremost [Media Commons] is for research and teaching in the university community. The circulating holdings are used by every level of patron, and the archival holdings, which are primary sources, are mainly used by upper level students and faculty.

T: What new research opportunities will arise once renovations are complete?

B: Finally our archival holdings are going to be easily available! They have not been up until now for several reasons. First of all, we have not promoted them very much. We are immensely proud of them, but we lacked an archival reading room and it is really difficult to provide quality-controlled access to archival collections if you do not have a dedicated reading room. We could not do it in our main reading room because it was not supervised, we did not have the proper equipment, and there basically was not enough room.
**T:** What other research opportunities are available to academics interested in audio-visual collections?

**B:** Many new opportunities arise as a result of the possibility of playback of all audio-visual formats. As with the acquisition of playback equipment, we have also made a point of getting digitization equipment. So for audio we can play almost every format and transfer it to a CD, and video to a DVD. Now we have the technical capabilities. As long as all the copyright issues are taken care of, we can make digital copies for researchers’ use, and handle requests to make [our material] more accessible to people outside of the institution. Material used to be available only by appointment with me, and depending on what was requested we might or might not be able to make copies of material. Just the fact that there is now greater accessibility for media documents of all types is going to promote research into various areas that are covered by these collections.

It also helps that over the last year we have received monetary donations from some of our archival donors. We really appreciate their help. This allowed me to hire an assistant and make archival material more available. If the [donations] trend continues, and I hope it will, I will continue to hire an assistant to help me with processing collections and reference work.

**T:** You have made a number of references to the breadth of your audio-visual archival material. What is the mandate of your media archive and how do you acquire the material?

**B:** Our mandate for Media Archives is to acquire, preserve, and make available archival and special collection materials of Canadian national and regional significance relating to the audio-visual and media communities and popular culture. Understand that it is not just the media, but anybody that produces media documents on any topic that may be of interest to any discipline or any faculty at the University of Toronto. A lot of our collections tend to be related to media and film production, video production, popular music production, advertising, and photography, but it is not just restricted to those communities.

It is also not just random collecting. It is split between me going after donors and donors coming to U of T offering materials, and a final decision is made through our Media Commons Faculty Acquisitions Advisory Committee, which consists of: Charlie Keil, head of the Cinema Studies program at UTM; Gage Averill, ex-Faculty of Music Dean and now Vice-Principal, Academic and Dean at UTM; Louis Kaplin, also at UTM and head of the New Media Centre and photography historian; Janet Paterson, Principal of Innis College; and Carole Moore, Chief Librarian of UTL. That committee takes my recommendations and written description of what is being offered and they make the decision as to whether we should go after a collection; whether it has research and teaching possibilities. If a potential fond is approved by the committee then we know for sure that there are research possibilities.
T: Where are these donations kept?

B: The archival holdings are split between two facilities. The cold storage vault on the St. George campus is where we keep film-based material. Most of the other archival material, textual material, posters, photographs, magnetic media, and so on, is stored at the Downsview facility.

T: Can you tell FIQ readers more about the cold storage vault?

B: The vault itself was built in 2006, and has over five thousand square feet of floor space loaded with compact shelving. It was built as a highly insulated “room within a room” completely sealed off from the larger host building, reducing the potential for damage as a result of fire or flooding. As I mentioned, it is fully climate controlled, with the air temperature currently set to 12°C. Two air purifiers filter the incoming air and a dehumidifier removes excess moisture.

It is also one of only three cold vaults in Ontario, the other two belonging to the CBC and Ontario Archives, respectively. It is quite rare to have this, and absolutely crucial if one is collecting audio-visual material. Film is inherently unstable and will deteriorate by itself whether it is played or not. The deterioration is going to happen regardless of what you do, so all you can hope to do is slow it down. The vault slows down the chemical reactions considerably with its cool temperature and low relative humidity. This gives us breathing time until we can get to the point where we start digitizing, as the material will still be in a very good state.

T: What collections are inside the vault and how are you organizing them?

B: I will answer the second question first. This is not optimum archival procedure, but because the cold vault is a finite amount of space, we have to start segregating our collections. The film stays in the vault; everything else is going to Downsview.

Its actual contents include collections in broadcasting, film, animation, advertising, music, photography, and acting. Some of our biggest donations are in film. The material from Alliance Atlantis, Robert Lantos-Serendipity Point Films, and Lionsgate are all massive. The fonds include much more than just film production or the final release print. Where it still exists, we collect material from all stages of the final production, so that involves a lot of textual material like budgets, scripts, contracts, and all sorts of legal documents. There is also a lot of material from the intermediate stages of production, including rough edits, fine cuts, different sound tracks, different mixes, alternate endings, and so forth; basically, everything that is generated in the making of the final production.

The areas we collect in reveal that [movie-making and broadcasting] are not just artistic processes, they are also a history of the technology, a business process, a legal process, and so we try to document all aspects of that. We have business records that would be of great
interest to somebody studying the entertainment business at the Rotman School of Management, because it shows how companies are formed, how they expand, how they contract or get merged with other companies. It also shows how a production is financed, how agreements are made with broadcasters and distributors, and it really shows marketing. There is a lot in these collections that directly connects to how popular culture is marketed.

At the same time, all the legal files – the copyright files, the contracts with directors, writers, producers – would appeal to anybody with a background or interest in entertainment law because there are not a lot of collections like this. For instance, the law library does not at the moment have archival material.

We also have amazing collections in music and photography. Our music holdings include the archives of groups like Blue Rodeo, Cowboy Junkies, and Triumph. As with the films, it is more than just albums, as it includes all of the multi-track tapes, master mixes, outtakes, live performances that have never seen the light of day, lyric sheets, contracts, posters, and so forth. In short: all the documents that are generated in the process of running a band. We also have collections from record companies like Alert Music (Holly Cole’s and Kim Mitchell’s label), and True North. The list goes on, providing exceptionally good documentation of how the Canadian music industry has worked from the 1960s through to now.

For photography we have the Now Magazine photographic archive, which is a record of Toronto and Canadian culture from 1981-2001. It was recently featured as an exhibition at the Thomas Fisher Library because it reflects what is going on in music, politics, theatre, protest culture, etc., over a 20-year period in our city. Other photographic collections include the Macleans Magazine image archive, portraiture from John Reeves, which contains a series of Canadian authors, Inuit artists, and a huge collection of international jazz musicians. We also have a wonderful collection from George Hunter, who does commercial and industrial photography.

T: What an incredible collection. Why have people not heard of these before and where can interested researchers go to get more information about your holdings?

B: We have not done much promotion because of our lack of an archival reading room. Now that we are under renovation and will soon be able to better support researchers, it is time for that to change. To help patrons find this material easier, a time will come soon when all the finding aids and their contents are going to be linked in to the online catalogue of the University of Toronto Libraries.

T: With the renovations to Media Commons, new playback and digitization opportunities, and now finding aids coming online, it sounds like a bona fide revolution in terms of end-user accessibility.
B: Absolutely. We are still not done standardizing the finding aids yet, but it is going to happen and that will really open things up; not just on campus but throughout the world. We have got some really important collections from people in these various cultural fields, and it is worth [researchers’] while to investigate what we have. If anyone is interested in looking into this before the finding aids are linked to the OPAC, they can find a list of the collections online at the Media Commons website <www.library.utoronto.ca/mediacommons>, or contact me for further information on our holdings.