

Digital Britain

A response from the Northern Region Film and Television (March 10, 2009)

The Northern Region Film and Television Archive (NRFTA) is a not for profit organisation which exists to collect, preserve and provide access to film, television and other moving image material relating to the history of the North East Region [see below for additional detail]. It is one of a network of similar organisations covering the entire country.

NRFTA welcomes the publication of Digital Britain, recognising it to be an important and timely intervention in a crucial debate. Our comments touch on three issues, and will be brief.

Rights and Intellectual Property.

It should be understood that in most cases the material held by Regional Film Archives is not actually 'owned' by the Archives but remains the intellectual property of the depositor. So, for instance, we have extensive holdings of material from Tyne Tees and the BBC which remains the property of those broadcasters. Increasingly, Archives are endeavouring to digitise and make available on line (and on DVD) their holdings as part of an increasingly important access agenda. Very often this ambition comes up against the (legitimate) rights management concerns of the original rights holder.

NRFTA welcomes the recognition that we need to consider a new settlement, a new business model, that balances the expectation of access and content availability with the needs of rights holders to protect their property. In particular, we agree whole-heartedly with the comment that "traditional mechanisms to identify right-holders and acquire legal consent to share often need radical updating to meet the near-instant demands of this new world".

We recognise that this issue goes much wider than the context of Archives. The specificity of Archive concern, however, is that often the material we would wish to make available has limited commercial value – the agenda is cultural and educational. Nonetheless, access is still hampered.

The Impending Digital Dark Ages

In a age where we float in a sea of digitalised content, from Face Book to Text Messaging, from Twitter to Mobile Phone Movies, and from email to permanent wireless connectivity, the very ubiquity of the digital threatens content with disposability. As costs of creation and sharing content shrink towards zero, and as the rate of creation of sharing rises exponentially, there is an increasing risk that digital content disappears as quickly as it appears. Historians and Archivist fear that we could be entering what some characterise as the 'Digital Dark Ages' where too little is archived and kept for future generations and future historians.

There is little agreement on how this problem might be tackled. The sheer scale of creation makes traditional curatorship approached increasingly inappropriate.

Nonetheless, we consider this to be an increasingly worrying issue and urge some address to this issue in the next round of consultation of Digital Britain

The Stability of the Regional Screen Archive sector.

As is noted above, Archives are increasingly concerned to digitise and make available on line as much of their collections as possible. Against the backdrop of the impending 'digital dark ages' they need to make a more concerted and structured collection programme to archive new, digital, material. They do this,

however, from the position of fragile and under-resourced organisations. The costs of maintaining temperature and humidity controlled vaults are substantial. And income streams uncertain. The UK Film Council, with government support, is beginning to address this but more needs to be done and more quickly.

If the argument is accepted that Screen Archives have an important role to play in the digital future, we urge increasing attention to the need to stabilise and underpin the sector.

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Northern Region Film and Television Archive



The Northern Region Film and Television Archive (NRFTA) is a not-for-profit organisation which exists to collect, preserve and provide access to film, television and other moving image material related to the history the North East Region of England, which is defined as the Tees Valley area and the counties of Durham, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear. It was founded in January 1998 as an unofficial consortium of four bodies which already held substantial film and television collections within the region: the University of Teesside, Tyne and Wear Archives Service (TWAS), Trade Films and Cumbria Archives Service. A temperature and humidity controlled vault facility was built for the NRFTA on the Teesside campus during 2003.

Current operations

NRFTA undertakes three core activities.

- **Acquisition.** There is no system of legal deposit for audiovisual media in the UK, and so moving image archives have to identify appropriate materials for collection.
- **Preservation.** Film, magnetic tape and digital optical media are among the most technically complex of any archival medium to preserve for the long-term. NRFTA staff carry out this task through a combination of preserving original media and copying.
- **Access.** This includes dealing with viewing requests from individual researchers, organising public screenings and licensing material to film and TV programme makers. Increasingly, access will be DVD and web driven.

Core Collections

- **The BBC Collection**

NRFTA holds all surviving materials from the BBC's flagship regional news programme, Look North

- **The Tyne Tees Collection**

NRFTA holds all the surviving film-based production materials from Tyne Tees Television, covering the station's launch in 1959 to 1990. The collection consists of regional news and sport items, plus the drama and documentary series produced by Tyne Tees in the 1970s and '80s. .

- **The Turners Collection**

Turners' Film Unit was a production company based in Newcastle, which operated between 1946 and 1995. It produced a variety of promotional films, advertisements, educational and training films and industrial documentaries.

- **The Trade Films Collection**

Trade Films was a company based in Gateshead which specialised in political documentaries and TV productions, and in particular films about mining in the north-east and the trade union movement.

- **The Tyne and Wear Archives Service (TWAS) Collection**

NRFTA looks after a collection of films from a variety of sources on behalf of TWAS relating to life and work in Newcastle and Tyne and Wear, in particular the shipbuilding industry.

- **Industrial, Educational and Training Films**

NRFTA holds a substantial collection (deposited from a number of sources) of films related to industry in the northern region.

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