



Media Archive for Central England and Yorkshire Film Archive

The Media Archive for Central England (MACE) and the Yorkshire Film Archive (YFA) are specialist public film archives responsible for collecting and preserving films relevant to their respective English regions. They are both independent registered charities based on university campuses but not owned or controlled by the universities. Therefore they have the advantage of autonomy, coupled with some local site and infrastructure support from their respective campuses. However, in this current period of crisis, while archive management has autonomy in decision making, this means that they are themselves handling short-term logistical and staff wellbeing issues, while at the same time considering the longer-term financial impacts of the corona virus crisis. This requires them to interpret and implement government advice and rescue schemes with little in the way of financial or legal expertise to support them.

But before considering the financial implications, one key decision has been out of these archives' control. In March, a fast-evolving situation saw the university campuses move towards full closure, albeit with some leeway for emergency access. For MACE and YFA, this presented significant logistical challenges. The safety of archive employees - close-working, office-based teams suddenly uprooted to work remotely and in isolation from each other - has been paramount, with increased management emphasis on communications and staff wellbeing. Safety of the archive collections is also key. With only a small proportion digitised, both archives have a remit to ensure the continued safe preservation of their film and tape collections stored in vaults on the now closed university campuses. Management are then faced with considering which archive work can feasibly be carried out remotely and which activities must be stopped. Any public-facing work (e.g. screenings and events) naturally has been cancelled and certain projects, such as on-site digitisation, must also be placed on hold. But one increasingly significant impact of campus closures, and no access to film and tape vaults, is the threat to commercial revenues. For both MACE and YFA, commercial licensing of archive footage accounts for around a third of their income. With little content digitised, it becomes nearly impossible to service client requests and, in any event, the clients themselves are facing their own productions and projects being cancelled or postponed as a result of the crisis. This unpredictability means a real threat, at least in the short-term, to an important revenue stream for these small regional archives.

A greater long-term concern is the possible threat to other funding streams. Commercial revenues aside, MACE and YFA are funded through a combination of public funds administered through national bodies such as the British Film Institute and the Arts Council, and other commissioned project work. The UK has no statutory system or structure in place for the sustained and ongoing funding of public film archives. Instead, organisations such as MACE and YFA can make bids (in competition with other archives and the wider heritage sector) for funding linked to specific, time-bound projects and deliverables. In times of crisis, what happens if public funding streams are reduced, delayed or cancelled? What if projects cannot meet their deliverables due to current logistical issues - will funding be withdrawn? Public funding bodies are working hard to put in place emergency funding streams in response to the corona virus crisis, and there are positive intentions to support the heritage sector, but these initiatives will be on a national scale, with all heritage sectors in competition. For the YFA's Director, Sue Howard, this raises a concern... "where is the representation for regional film archives at a national level?"

For small archives, with little in the way of cash reserves, now facing various threats to their funding streams and struggling to raise their profile when others across all sectors in the UK (heritage and beyond) are facing similar difficulties, this situation is precarious. However, Dr Clare Watson of MACE suggests that the corona virus crisis simply throws into sharp relief the very real financial difficulties faced by some film archives even in the best of times, and now might be the time at which the role and funding of those archives could rise to the national level. It would require some analysis of the current funding models and structures in play across film heritage (where there is not consistency today) in order to change to a new model. But it is a known problem and now could be the time to address it, if there is a willingness in the film heritage sector to do so.

Visit <https://www.macearchive.org/> and <http://www.yorkshirefilmarchive.com/> for further information on these archives and their collections.