

20. Intertwining spheres

Public archiving of private home video collections

Renée Winter

Public audiovisual archives like the Österreichische Mediathek (Austrian National Audiovisual Archive) have long been concerned with documenting the political as well as the cultural public sphere. National and international efforts have worked to collect and preserve historic film documents from the private sphere. An ongoing Österreichische Mediathek project addresses a source typically viewed as marginal: private video sources from the 1980s and 1990s. The challenges are not only to develop a collection and archiving strategy for a type of content on which there is little to no scientific research but also to master the technical challenges of archiving such materials for the long term. This paper examines the development and the workflow of the project and goes on to consider the historical functions of home videos and their qualities as historical sources.

The Changing Role of Audio-Visual Archives as Memory Storages in the Public Space is a project being carried out at the Österreichische Mediathek, an institution with considerable experience in archiving and digitizing audio as well as audiovisual (AV) resources. Österreichische Mediathek was founded in 1960 as Österreichische Phonotheek (Austrian Phonotheek) by the Ministry of Education and has been a branch of the Technisches Museum Wien

(Vienna Technical Museum) since 2001. As a video and sound archive and the Austrian archive for sound recordings and videos on cultural and contemporary history, the Österreichische Mediathek is responsible for the preservation of Austrian audiovisual cultural heritage (with the exception of film on photographic carrier material and photography).

The project collects and secures private video recordings, in particular those from the 1980s and 1990s, and makes them accessible. At the same time, it works to develop a collection strategy for video materials that document everyday life in Austria.

The work has been financed by the Wiener Wissenschafts-, Forschungs- und Technologiefonds (Vienna Science and Technology Fund), a non-profit organization established to promote science and research in Vienna. Funding was secured for a project duration of three years (December 2013–November 2016); the costs of long-term archiving however will be borne by the Österreichische Mediathek.

Project workflow

A workflow had to be specially developed for the long-term archiving of private video sources. This workflow comprises acquisition of videocassettes, rights clearance, acquisition of metadata (based on a questionnaire), reviewing of technical suitability, entry of metadata, digitization, file transfer (and optionally return of cassettes) to the donors, content-related and technical-qualitative evaluation and selection and eventually publication. The acquisition of source material is based on a comprehensive collection and archiving strategy for AV archives and the conception of specific collection guidelines. The collection guidelines are in a constant process of developing and adapting (both in form and content) on the basis of a theoretical and historical examination of the subject of private video practices as well as on the grounds of technical considerations.

Acquisition: cooperation and partnerships

Based on the collection guidelines, an acquisition strategy was implemented that operates on different levels: social and traditional media, events and activities (e.g. Home Movie Day), regional structures and networking with

different partners. In addition to a wide range of media partners, there are collaborations with existing (amateur film) associations as well as the Austrian Film Museum and local museums. Here especially the *Bezirksmuseen* (district museums) of Vienna are of great importance: every one of the 23 districts of Vienna has its own local history museum. They are often engaged in local activities and have a core audience. Through regular consultation hours at the museums and screenings of home movies and home videos in the museums, public awareness is raised concerning the subjects of preservation of (home) videos, of digitization and of long-term archiving. The extensive public outreach based on these partnerships has led to a collection of more than 2 500 videos after two years.

Meaning for society and preservation strategies

The public sphere is, if not well documented in AV archives in all areas, sufficiently documented in many aspects. The political and cultural spheres are documented mostly through radio and television recordings. Even marginal areas of this public sphere, focused mostly on Vienna, are archived in the Österreichische Mediathek: there are in-house recordings of cultural and scientific events as well as attempts to incorporate collections which depict the public space (e.g. public transport announcements).

Hardly or not at all documented is the private space. Yet in this instance a gap is opening between existing documents and preserved material: never before have there been so many possibilities for depicting cultural and social manifestations of life. Never before were the production possibilities of these sources so widespread and so easy to implement in terms of technical and financial effort, and with AV media there are now sources that can capture and relay the sensual-emotional aspect of events.

Despite those possibilities key areas of our media past and present remain undocumented. If there is already a yawning gap in the 'official' record of radio and television broadcasting companies, which must not be underestimated, then the one in the private sphere is considerably larger.

The aim of this project is therefore to collect and document private video recordings since the 1980s, preserve them (digital long-term archiving) and make them accessible. Without long-term archiving they only survive for a few years, two or three decades at best. The window for preservation by means of archiving is therefore very small, and preservation enables permanent use by the future public. It is therefore evident that the source collection intended in this project is of particular relevance, especially because so far hardly any methodical or strategic long-term efforts have been made in

this direction. This is also true for digitization and digital long-term archiving: in many scientific projects this area is insufficiently covered and falls short of archival standards.

The introduction of amateur video recording devices has given rise to a major increase in documentary and historical source material. It has become possible for large sections of the population to document their environments and daily routines, their celebrations and vacations in a new and extensive way. Yet this democratization of source has not been met with equivalent preservation strategies.

For current research approaches in the field of historical sciences, sociology and urban studies, an access to these sources that is as easy as possible is a prerequisite for gaining additional insight. For instance, the project preserves documentation of private living spaces in Vienna, acting in some respects as a hinge between private and public spaces. These video recordings by people living in Vienna represent changes in the city's society and reflect social transformations, such as the progression of the social position of women, technological changes and uses of information technology or social movements.

Online video platforms such as YouTube possess their own archive-character with regard to their publishing practices and their access possibilities. However, these platforms are predominantly guided by market economic circumstances, the content-related and technical documentation of single recordings is mostly deficient – and, most importantly, long-term archiving and future access is disconnected from the users. It is impossible to know if a platform applies a reliable strategy of long-term archiving, or if it plans to keep its documents for a long time at all. The preservation of content on these platforms follows solely commercial interests; forecasts regarding permanently secured access cannot be made. This results in a remarkable intrinsic contradiction: On the one hand these platforms contribute to a pluralization of society, enable a wide exchange of information and have by now become instruments of attempts at social upheaval. On the other hand, the underlying systems are not subject to democratic control but are governed by corporate strategies, focused primarily on the present. Subsequently, the long-term documentation of contents of public spaces has to rest not with commercial video sharing but with archives, which have only been able to face these problems rudimentarily until now.

The project conducted at the Österreichische Mediathek combines technical expertise relating to the digitization of different source formats with decades of experience in long-term archiving and broad access to the resources via an extensive online platform.

Video digitization

In order to find an adequate answer to the challenges of digitization in the context of an extensive historical audiovisual archive with a huge collection of audio as well as video carriers, the Österreichische Mediathek developed DVA-Profession, a comprehensive open-source software solution for video digitization. Every step of the workflow, from digitization to analysis, generating preview images and videos, manual quality control, documentation of all process metadata and file storage, is designed and optimized for long-term archiving.¹

One major problem the project has to face now is that due to the condition of the videotapes as well as the great diversity of video formats (and the ignorance of most of the donors of technical details concerning their tapes) the digitization process takes longer than planned. We learned that there can be a great difference between digitizing videos kept under optimal conditions in an archive and digitizing private videotapes. Private material often is in significantly worse physical condition. Most videotapes have been stored in private houses. As a consequence, they have been exposed to a wide range of environments. Fluctuations in temperature and humidity and sun exposure can damage videotapes.

Comparing privately held videotapes with those already in the Österreichische Mediathek collections reveals dramatic differences. It is easy to see how professional storage conditions prolong the durability of the videotapes. This comparison shows that the window for preservation by means of archiving is very small – and how important it is to cope with these problems right now to guarantee access to private sources for further research.

Home videos as historical source

But what do these home videotapes tell us? What can we see when we refer to home video as a historical source? When we try to reconstruct private lives by means of highly constructed narratives? How can we get to the marginalized, the political sides of home videos?

As already mentioned, video technology allowed for a democratization and popularization of audiovisual recording. Media studies has been primarily interested in the activist/subversive or avant-garde side of video: in its inherent possibilities to produce counter-images, to film events and demonstrations and thus to control the audiovisual representations of social movements.

The Österreichische Mediathek holds more than 800 videocassettes from Heinz Granzer. Granzer, a union activist, filmed the founding and development of an important cultural centre in Vienna in the 1980s (which still exists) as well as many demonstrations and events of the political left and the peace movement in Vienna and Austria. After he died, in 2014, his friends and his video group donated his huge collection to the Österreichische Mediathek.

Granzer's videos fulfil a function of video that John Fiske emphasized. He argued against a deterministic view of technical developments and pointed out that "a new technology does not, of itself, determine that it *will* be used or *how* it will" (Fiske, 1996, p. 386). Fiske strongly stressed the possibilities of video for activist purposes:

It is an instrument of both communication and surveillance. It can be used by the power bloc to monitor the comings and goings of the people, but equally its cameras can be turned 180 social degrees, to show the doings of the power bloc to the people (p. 391).

Video benefits from an authenticity of the 'low-tech form':

The credibility of video depends upon the social domain of its use. In the domain of the low (low capital, low technology, low power), video has an authenticity that results from its user's lack of resources to intervene in its technology. When capital, technology, and power are high, however, the ability to intervene, technologically and socially, is enhanced (p. 387).²

Although this activist use is undoubtedly very important and such sources should be preserved, I would also like to argue for the political and historical significance of the videos in the 'home mode'. This term was introduced in home video discourse by James Moran (referring to Chalfen, 1987), who noted, "Typically, discourses about amateur video generally uphold the avant-garde as progressive and denigrate the home mode as reactionary" (Moran, 2002, p. xix).

In order to take home videos seriously, to read them adequately as historical documents, it is necessary to take into account modes of reception, modes of meaning production and different functions of home videos.

¹ This product is available under a free software licence (GNU General Public License v3.0) and can be downloaded at www.dva-profession.mediathek.at.

² Odin (2014) asserts that this 'authenticity' is responsible for restricting the possibilities of critique of audiovisual representations. See below.

Communication spaces

Roger Odin (2014) asks what happens to home movies (and home videos) when they move to contexts other than the familial space in which they have been produced. When they move for example to the Internet, to the archive or to television. This question is particularly interesting if we relate to the videos as historical sources, as traces of other people's lives we do not know or of families that are not our own. Odin proposed five communication spaces of home movies, each corresponding to specific reading or reception modes.

The original or oldest space of home movie, which is inextricably linked to a bourgeois and patriarchal family model, is the 'familial memory space'. In this respect the home movie resembles an "album of moving photographs" filmed by the father: he constructs family history and controls its screening and interpretation (Odin, 2014, p.16). In the 'private reception mode' a group (such as a family) reconstructs its history when screening the film together; in the 'intimate mode' each member of the group makes its own reflections about her or his past and the group's history.

This communication space corresponds with discourses of standardization of the home movies. These standards and norms are written down in a great number of handbooks and manuals which tell how and what to film (as well as, more subtly, who films), how to frame, how to tell an entertaining story of Christmas, children's birthdays or vacations.

Hand in hand with new family structures go technological changes: there is a shift to smaller devices and the recording material gets cheaper. More family members are doing the filming, and the films move to other places. They are shared on the Internet, being watched from scattered family members alone at their computers. This new development forms what Odin calls the "ego space of communication". He argues, "In the new familial structure, the photo album of the family and the film of the family are being replaced by a multitude of photographs and films on the family" (2014, p. 20). In addition a new mode of meaning production enters the space: the 'testimonial mode', in which the subject "gives its perspective on what it sees or on what it has seen; in this case, on the life of the family" (p. 20).

At the Österreichische Mediathek we have collected home videos which represent this shift from the familial space to the ego space, such as a group of 26 videocassettes from a small family living in Vienna: mother, father and two children (born in 1989 and 1992). From 1992 to 2003 the father was primarily filming; the mother got a camera for her fortieth birthday in 2004 and filmed from then on until 2009. You can see remarkable differences in the filming. I would not want to essentialize these in terms of gender

differences, but they express changes of perspective, technology and the construction of family narratives – as well as the function of the camera. While at the beginning the camera is used to represent family events, Christmas parties and the growing up of the children in a rather conventional way, focusing on milestone life events and the happy moments of the family, later on the functions of the camera within family life get more diverse. It is not only used as a tool of surveillance and control of the kids and the husband but also, as the family members more frequently move apart (for example, the mother travels with her best friend to Italy), as evidence or as testimonial (of really having been in Rome, for instance).

As Odin notes, in contrast to the familial memory space which prefers the consensual history of the family album, this mode is much more open to conflict and dissent.

Home videos in public spaces

When home movies move to public archives, they enter both a 'documentary space' and a 'collective memory space'. In the first, the home movie functions as historical document, read in the documentary mode; in the second, it stimulates collective (and often regional) memory, read in the private mode.

The last communication space, the 'space of authenticity', Odin identifies mostly when home movies move to television. Home movies are often used to add authenticity to documentaries, and there also exists a whole genre of home movie shows like *America's Funniest Home Videos* or, in Germany, *Uppps – die Pannenshow*.

In Odin's view it is precisely the notion of authenticity – the authenticity mode – that attempts "to restrict the possibilities of the emergence of a critical inquisitiveness among spectators" (2014, p. 25). In this case, something happens that he calls the "home movie effect"; the home movie becomes an

instrument for the reduction of critical consciousness. In doing that, the home movie returns to one of its primary functions within the familial space: avoiding problems, creating consensus, and perpetuating the position of the institution (p. 26).

Conclusion

The objective of collecting, preserving and analysing home videos cannot be to salvage or recover real, authentic private lives; rather, the intent is to ask questions about what role the camera and video technology have played in the everyday life of people and which functions are attributed to

the camera as a recording device and to the documents it produces. Thus it would ideally be necessary to archive contextual information and materials: the carriers, labels, personal data about the videographers and persons in the videos, and information about camera use in the family or about the use of other media, photography, film and so forth. If available, other ego-documents such as diaries, letters or oral history interviews can enable analysis of the meaning and importance of the home videos within a group. Since we can view these videos as attempts to construct happy families and happy private lives, research on private video collections is also about identifying conflicts, gaps and disruptions in these narratives. Researchers should ask questions about how these documents were and are watched differently by various members of a group, of a family and of society. Coming back to John Fiske again:

[T]echnology may limit what can or cannot be seen but it does not dictate the way it is watched. Technology may determine what is shown, but society determines what is seen (1996, p. 386).

Audiovisual archives may determine what can be seen and heard by future generations, and they should enable as many different ways of reading and watching archival sources as possible.

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Renée Winter is a historian and lecturer at the University of Vienna (Institute for Contemporary History, Institute for European Ethnology and others). She worked as a researcher at the Österreichische Mediathek (Austrian National Audiovisual Archive) for the project The Changing Role of Audio-Visual Archives as Memory Storages in the Public Space from 2014 to 2016. In 2012 she finished her dissertation on history programmes on early Austrian television. Her research interests include media history, gender constructions, (post-)history of national socialism and the Holocaust, migration history and postcolonialism.