



Bringing Order to Chaos: Archival Processing and the USIA Film Collection

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Introduction

The United States Information Agency (USIA) was an independent government agency created in 1953 to support American foreign policy while promoting U.S. national interests abroad. Building on the work of predecessors, including the Foreign Information Service (FSI), the Office of War Information (OWI), and various offices within the Department of State, USIA sought to achieve greater mutual understanding between the U.S. and foreign societies, and this aim was accomplished in part through the work of the agency's motion picture film division. Although some of the film productions shown to audiences overseas were acquired from external sources, the USIA produced hundreds of documentaries internally, often through contracts with independent production companies such as Allegro Films, the Thomas Craven Film Corporation, and many, many others. The USIA existed until 1999, when it was disbanded under the provisions of the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998, and its functions were transferred to the Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). However, the legacy of over-45 years of USIA filmmaking and acquisition remains, and that legacy is now waiting to be rediscovered through the holdings of the National Archives & Records Administration (NARA).

Arrangement

Much of the work that archivists perform at the National Archives involves the physical processing of moving image records. In the archival sense, "processing" refers to the steps needed to take records as they were originally received by NARA and establish the physical and intellectual control required for preservation and researcher access. This involves: the creation of physical needs assessments; inventorying, arranging, numbering, and labeling at an item level; physical rehousing; the evaluation of access and use restrictions; and publishing series- and/or item-level descriptions in the National Archives Catalog. Archivists at NARA are not involved with chemical film processing, film development, or technical assessment tasks; preservation specialists in NARA's Motion Picture Preservation Lab perform all technical processing work. Therefore, it is the combination of steps performed by archivists and Lab specialists that comprises the overall film

processing workflow at NARA, and cooperation and communication between archivists and Lab staff is critical to achieving optimal processing results.

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As of 2020, the unprocessed USIA motion picture holdings at NARA occupy approximately 1,250 cubic feet of shelf space in climate-controlled archival stack areas, and the processed USIA motion pictures consist of over 6,700 cubic feet of film and video, half of which belong to a broad collection of moving image material referred to as the ["General" USIA series](#). This series includes an assortment of original documentaries, educational productions, biographies, newsreels, speeches, press conferences, and unedited film clips. The other half of the processed USIA film is divided among 105 separate series, all of which are much narrower in scope. All

records at the National Archives are arranged at the highest level according to an originating government agency, department, or other organizational unit, each of which is assigned its own unique number, called a Record Group number. Within a Record Group, holdings are maintained in a series of records that share a common denominator, such as the function and use of the records, office of origin, or filing history.

U.S. Information Agency film is maintained under Record Group 306, which encompasses the totality of USIA material available at NARA, regardless of media type. Each subsequent moving image series is then assigned a series identifier—sometimes referred to as a series designator—that typically bears some relation to the function and use of the records thereunder, or the name of a production series. As such, the broad collection of "General" USIA moving images is known as 306-GENERAL (with the word "GENERAL" referring to the agency's general library of films) and often represented by a period (.) in most formal citations, whereas the separate series are cataloged under series identifiers such as 306-LSS (Library Stock Shots), 306-SR (Science Report), [306-IN \(Iranian Newsreels\)](#), and [306-HA \(Hoja\)](#). Films in Record Group 306 are not always separated by production series. For example, titles belonging to collections that were acquired but not originally produced by the USIA (such as *CBS Reports*, *The Earth and Its Peoples*, *American Scene*, *Planet Earth*, and *Cultures and Continents*, to name just a few) are more likely to exist as individual items processed within 306-GENERAL. Historically, titles belonging to production series that were originally produced by the USIA—or transferred independently, apart from 306-GENERAL—have been processed as separate archival series when identified as such. USIA-related titles may even be found among series in other Record Groups, if that was their provenance. Some of the USIA series are quite large; 306-WNET (Worldnet) comprises over 4,400 individual titles and 7,600 physical videotapes. Other series are very small; 306-ICSE (Information Center Service Exhibits) contains just one piece of 16mm film. Most lie somewhere in between in terms of size, but all series include content produced or acquired by the USIA motion picture division for the purpose of foreign screening or broadcast.

Processing History

Although the bulk of USIA audiovisual records first arrived at the National Archives in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a concerted effort to begin processing those records did not occur until the mid-1980s. Processing work stopped and started at various points during the late 1980s and

throughout the 1990s, as additional batches of film and video continued to trickle in to NARA from USIA headquarters and other USIA offices, libraries, and posts around the world. Partial inventories, item lists, and documentation were occasionally provided with the transfers and later compiled and supplemented based on several sources—including accession dossiers, film inspection reports, finding aids, and reference publications. Early processing efforts yielded a solid basis for the arrangement of the USIA film, but intellectual and physical control remained fairly disjointed until mid-2013, when a more systematic approach was applied to processing and description. Film elements were spread out across the archival stacks in dozens of locations, including in offsite storage facilities. Some of these elements were noted in the tracking databases, while others were not. Only about half of the processed titles that existed in the 306-GENERAL collection were available in a searchable, electronic format. An overwhelming percentage of those titles were either incomplete or inaccurate. As a result, identical titles processed into the 306-GENERAL series multiple times (and even across series) were routinely found, resulting in splintered archival sets. Unrelated titles were sometimes cataloged under the same local identifiers. Additionally, roughly 1,800 cubic feet of totally unprocessed, completely undescribed USIA film was still sitting on the shelves at the National Archives. The use of electronic recordkeeping tools improved the ability to understand and reunite the holdings, but the only way to truly bring the USIA collection under physical and intellectual control was to embark on a comprehensive accounting of every single physical element—both processed and unprocessed—that existed among the USIA motion picture accessions at NARA.

Current Processing Efforts

Systematic inventorying of the moving image elements began with the unprocessed film reels, the vast majority of which had not been touched in the 35-plus years since the USIA transferred them to NARA. Every single unprocessed film and video element in the archival stacks belonging to the USIA collection was consolidated and peripherally examined. Then, the most relevant information that could be ascertained for every element—including title, film or video format, footage count, running time, and soundtrack language—was methodically recorded and tracked on a rapidly-growing assortment of spreadsheets. Additionally, any unprocessed elements belonging to one of the known USIA series were identified and re-shelved among similar elements. Gradually, the breadth of the unprocessed inventory began to take shape, and an all-encompassing analysis of the USIA collection at NARA was finally underway.

A complete accounting of the processed USIA collection began shortly after the unprocessed film was cataloged. Every film and video container in the USIA collection that was available at the Archives II building in College Park, MD was opened and examined, with its contents then tracked. The result was a vastly more detailed picture of the collection at both the intellectual and physical levels. This data greatly improved the accuracy of internal NARA tracking databases and the public-facing National Archives Catalog online. A major update to the existing 306-GENERAL title list in the Catalog was completed in 2017. An upload of thousands of additional 306-GENERAL titles that had previously been discoverable only through the textual finding aids available on-site at the National Archives occurred the following year. Enhanced descriptive information for the 306-GENERAL titles has been consistently added to those Catalog records ever since, and efforts to improve the accountability of film elements stored in offsite facilities remains ongoing.

Major improvements to the USIA moving image collection have been made in the past seven years, but the lack of supplemental background information for thousands of USIA titles continues to challenge archivists' ability to describe much of the collection—especially with respect to titles that have foreign language soundtracks or no soundtracks at all. While physical and intellectual control of the records can be established early in the processing workflow, so as to make them available to researchers, reassigning specific elements to different item numbers and/or series later on is sometimes deemed necessary. When reassignment actions occur, records of those changes are maintained to document provenance, chain of custody, and to preserve a history of processing efforts. Accurately assigning unprocessed film elements to titles in either the 306-GENERAL series or to one of the other USIA series often remains difficult. Even if those unprocessed film elements are screened and meticulously described, or even translated, understanding the connections between titles across the whole of the unprocessed and processed holdings remains virtually impossible until the processed film elements in the parent series undergo the same level of description. Some descriptive information about USIA titles can be pulled from resources available online or from textual records received from (or published by) the USIA, but the only way to gather descriptive information for much of the USIA film footage is to personally screen it. This work regularly requires additional research and verification beyond the scope of traditional archival processing, particularly for titles that arrived at NARA with minimal background information.

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For example, large sections of the 306-GENERAL series contain various press conferences, speeches, or appearances by government officials, but few of those titles arrived at NARA with specific identifying information attached. Therefore, a considerable amount of time is needed to simply screen portions of those films to determine the accuracy of dates and names, as well as to ascertain whether other copies of a particular press conference or speech might already exist elsewhere in the collection. Edited films sometimes have supplemental descriptive information available; unedited films rarely have additional information available. Screening does not have to occur before the content is made available to researchers; title lists and other documentation are routinely published before comprehensive technical processing and screening work can be done by archivists. However, to consistently improve the usability of the USIA collection, continued enhancement of individual film titles and descriptions remains vital.

Conclusion

Archivists at NARA have devoted thousands of hours to processing, inventorying, arranging, and describing the USIA film collection, and yet there is so much more work left to accomplish. Hundreds of cubic feet of unprocessed film remain on the shelves. Entire series of foreign-language newsreels and documentaries are undescribed. Scattered, incomplete, or nonexistent item-level information continues to hinder the discoverability of individual films. Reels of film processed in 306-GENERAL that are likely outtakes from edited titles have yet to be identified as such. Some of the separate USIA series still contain titles that are totally unrelated because they were originally processed together, either due to confusion, lack of documentation, or both. All of these challenges put together have resulted in the emergence of an unusually large and complex puzzle that can only be fully untangled with time, patience, and persistence. And yet, the accessibility and visibility of the USIA film collection has increased exponentially in recent years. New processing, reorganization, and description work occurs daily, and digital reference copies now exist for over 2,500 USIA titles. Through the continued efforts of archivists, preservation specialists, and independent scholars alike, this vast collection of USIA film—for so long unknown and unavailable to domestic audiences —is poised to illuminate a largely-forgotten chapter in American film history.

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