

The Web 2.0 Archive: Mediaburn.org and Many-to-Many Archiving



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Elizabeth Coffman:

I first learned about the Media Burn Archive because I was interested in the history of video, particularly in the independent documentary activists who made revolutionary noises in the 1960s and '70s. These guerilla artists produced the first video that was counter to the centralized control of the broadcasters, video that was more democratic, that was in the streets, that was participatory and freely distributed.

It was through this historic lens of early independent video that I heard about Tom Weinberg, one of the leaders in the independent television movement in this

country, particularly in Chicago. From Chicago Tom collaborated with video activists and artists in New York and California through media collectives such as Ant Farm and Top Value TV. These media collectives were responsible for the first non-commercial portable video documentaries covering Republican and Democratic national conventions and broadcast on TV in 1972. They drove a Cadillac through a stack of burning TV's while recording the whole media event in 1975.

Tom's term—"Media Burn"—is the borrowed name for the event he helped to produce—the flaming Cadillac event—but he also meant it as a term that describes a particular kind of media fatigue—an exhaustion for both the viewer and the viewed, a weariness that must be eradicated, erased, critiqued and replaced.

The Media Burn Independent Video Archive started with shows that Tom produced for TV—close to 500 of them. He produced shows such as "Image Union"—the 30-year running series out of Chicago and "THE 90's"—both featuring short, independent videos from around the world that Tom selected. The majority of the 6000+ videos in the archive are camera originals that provide a primary electronic record of documentaries and video art from the 1970s into the 21st century.

Tom was already curating for TV. He just needed to collect these moving images, find a way to digitize and distribute them online. If there's anything distinctive about the materials he collected in Media Burn's archive, it's that the videos emphasize the 'outsiders' perspective, the noncommercial stories, the art that doesn't seem to fit in to any museums, or the video that aims a critical eye at established authorities both within the media and outside of it.

Abandoning the singular curatorial role of the archivist—no longer expecting the interested viewer or researcher to simply find their digitized material—is part of what's significant about Media Burn. Its continuing goal is to build loops and input from viewers, academics and the general public to maximize the interactive and educational value of the archive.

In the past two years, Loyola Chicago, our university library, our School of Communication and CURL, a successful Center for Urban Research and Learning—have combined their interests with some of Media Burn's into a new grant initiative. We're calling it the 3D project—Democratizing Digital Data. We've reached out to some of the Chicago's successful, long-active community groups—many work in lower income neighborhoods or with youth at troubled schools, but all have closets full of disintegrating video, photos and documents.

The larger goals of this 3D Project are to train community groups in basic archival methods, first curating their own material and then providing them with the infrastructure for digitizing, storing, cataloguing, tagging and finally redistributing the material back into these communities.

Each partner in the 3D project has different goals. The School of Communication is concerned with the state of local journalism and the shortage of community-related news stories. CURL is involved because of its sociological mission to connect the university center with the Chicago community and to gather urban studies research material. (CURL's endowment is in excess of \$8 million.)

Our library is interested because they are simultaneously developing new video storage and retrieval tools at a Tier One research university. And Media Burn is interested in applying their expertise in digital archiving to preserve and create access to likeminded independent work from around the entire city.

All partners will contribute faculty and expertise that supports both their interests and the larger goals of the developing archive. What we won't know for a while is, first—who will fund us—but, equally importantly, just how these community groups, and the people they represent will respond and participate.

Will the videos curated by the community groups align with the archive's other materials? Should they be maintained in a separate archival area from videos already in the collection? Will the archive be actively used for sociological research? Will grant support and institutional collaboration help us to transform audiences into users, and perhaps even producers?

For these questions, I think we have to take a few more lessons from Media Burn. As Sara has done so well already, we will need to make sure that we maintain a curator for the undiscovered fan—the fan who doesn't know they're a fan yet. A curator like Sara, or maybe several Sara's—Archival D.J.s who will pick out juicy bits and float them out there on YouTube or Vimeo or the School of Communication's web site or the neighborhood's blog, or in venues yet to be created or perhaps with accessibility that doesn't exist yet.

Then the archive will continue to build a variety of new followers—fans, researchers, scholars, filmmakers—who will access the Media Burn Archive and who may even contribute something back to it.

Democratizing Digital Data—it sounds like a worthy goal of the original guerilla activists...

Sara Chapman:

Our goal for "Reimagining the Archive" is to present two aspects of the online digital archive embraced by Media Burn that have changed the way history is collected and presented:

1) Multi-directional feedback

Media Burn was conceived of as a specifically online archive that now lives in the multi-directional online information sphere. Receiving data from our users is of

equal importance to pushing data outward. The collection is continually enriched by the submission of historical information from observers, creators, and participants.

One example of this kind of feedback occurred with a recently restored Videofreex tape shot between 1969-1971, depicting performances by counter-culture artist and musician Tuli Kupferberg. Last winter, one of Kupferberg's close friends interviewed him about the tape and provided Media Burn with a written oral history/essay describing the events on the tape in great detail. We were extremely lucky to have received this input from Kupferberg only a few months before his death in July, 2010. <http://mediaburn.org/Video-Preview.128.0.html?&uid=5974>

We believe that the Media Burn Archive should be continually enriched by this type of information from firsthand participants and non-traditional experts, in addition to academic and scholarly input, and that its online presence makes this both inviting and possible. The exciting new role of the virtual archive is to be in constant flux, continuously breaking new ground and changing the relationship between archive and audience from the traditional one-way flow of authority-based information to a multi-dimensional site for information flowing in many directions between users.

2) Abandoning Singular Curatorial Role

Originally, Media Burn believed that the essential part of fulfilling our mission was creating our own website to present our curated collection. In the past five years, though, we have learned that by posting versions of their videos on many different websites, including YouTube, the Internet Archive, Facebook, Vimeo, and others, Media Burn videos have achieved more than 5 million page views in the past three years—a remarkable result for historical content.

By distributing content through as many channels as possible, Media Burn is able to reach audiences who have an interest in their content but don't care (or don't know they care) about independent video or documentary or history. It's not really important that the material be presented in the context of the Media Burn collection and vision; what is more important is that groups with dedicated interests, like early video arcade games, or Bill Veeck fans, or Chicago politics aficionados, find this work and make it part of their online communities.

While some people would like to see archival objects through the limited lens of the institution, it's much more interesting and satisfying for users to create their own contexts and meanings, and the archive's job is simply to make it more and more likely that they will be able to find the content and make it their own.

---With commentary, editorial advice and inspiration from **Tom Weinberg**