

Digitising History

Linda Kaye, Project Manager of the British Universities Newsreel Scripts Project (BUNSP), assesses the problems, solutions and issues raised by the digitisation of 80,000 newsreel production documents.

The British Universities Newsreel Scripts Project (BUNSP) has reached the mid-point of its project lifecycle of four years, prompting assessment of the present, evaluation of the past and discussion of future priorities and direction.

The BUNSP has been funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Board (AHRB), to digitise 80,000 newsreel production documents and publish them online via the British Universities Newsreel Database (BUND), which already holds about 160,000 records relating to newsreel stories. These documents, drawn primarily from British Paramount News, Pathe News and Universal News, reveal how the newsreel stories were gradually built up, from the initial assignment sheets given to the cameramen to the final shotlists of the finished news item.

The present position of the project is a strong one. It has established procedures which have successfully delivered over 20,000 digitised newsreel production documents on the BUND, encompassing the entire extant documentation of British Paramount News from 1931 to 1956.

It became clear through our 'mid-life evaluation' that the 'continuation' status of the BUNSP, a project built on previous projects, had greatly influenced the questions that were asked, and consequently the solutions devised to digitise a large paper based collection and publish it online. The methodology of the project was embedded in and shaped by its history. Analysing the interaction of the history and methodology has provided us with the tools for approaching questions of access to our digital resource.

The history of the BUNSP can be traced back to 1969 and the establishment of the Slade Film History Register by Thorold Dickinson. With a grant from the Social Science Research Council, material relating to non-fiction film, focusing on newsreels, was collated and indexed. With the end of the grant in 1974, the Register of 30,000 newsreel stories passed to the then British Universities Film Council, which continued to add to the collection of newsreel issue sheet copies and published research based on it. In 1995

the BUFVC was awarded a four-year grant to construct a database of newsreel stories based on the newsreel issue sheets. This resulted in an online database, the British Universities Newsreel Database (BUND) of about 160,000 stories which the BUNSP (1999-2003) has now supplemented with over 20,000 newsreel production documents.

In terms of providing the structural framework for the BUNSP methodology, the Slade Film History Register provided the content for the BUND. This content and more importantly, the research carried out by the BUFVC and the experience derived from the dialogue with potential users, dictated the fields that were developed for the database e.g. the release date, issue and item fields. The completion of the BUND in 1999 then effectively provided the metadata for the BUNSP.

Thus the history of previous projects and their interaction with the organisation not only provided our project with a structured form of metadata but an extensive user profile. The following user priorities concerning the documents were identified from this: readability as much as appearance, a reasonable access time and closest experience to handling the document.

These user priorities effectively dictated the access file standards for the digitised documents. The decision to produce grayscale documents was influenced by the content over appearance argument. The need to keep the file size to a minimum was fulfilled by scanning the documents in grayscale at 150 dpi and dividing the files for each story into five categories: assignment sheets; commentary sheets; dope sheets; shotlists and ephemera. The pdf format maintained the feel of the document. It also provided a zoom-in/zoom-out facility as well as the capacity to print out the document.

These historical strands formulated the way in which the problem was viewed – as one of linking digitised documents of different types to the related records on the database. The solution devised was to use the BUND number, the individual six figure identifier for each record, to link the pdfs to the metadata. This formed the basis of a three-step procedure: the identification and labelling of the docu-

ments; the scanning and production of the CDs and the publication of the data online.

The BUNSP had identified the parameters set by previous projects, using them to devise a method and series of procedures to carry out the process of digitisation. During the course of implementation, it was realised that two fundamental assumptions had been made based on spot checks of the different collections: each document related to one record or story; each document related to one of the designated types. The fact that the documents could relate to more than one story or type resulted in a greater level of complexity at the preparation and scanning stages, impacting on the planned workflow. The history had dictated our conceptual framework to such an extent that a blindside in the methodology emerged only during implementation. These lessons of the past, re-visiting basic assumptions in order to broaden our frame/s of reference, are being used to inform our views of what is delivered online and how more people can be encouraged to use it.

One method of 're-examining the wallpaper', objects which are so much a part of your world that you no longer see them, is to look at how they are described. A common phrase already used in this article, 'the publication of documents online', contains a number of assumptions. It implies that the original documents are simply reproduced in a different medium. It glosses over the fact that a digitised image has been created in place of the original object, fundamentally changing the traditional discourse with, in our case, the primary source material.

The way in which one looks at, handles and compares the digitised image is completely different from the relationship the user has with the documents. The creation of the image has changed the user's visual frame of reference. With the pdfs of the newsreel production documents, the user can alter the size of the image and magnify words to a degree not possible if you were physically handling the document. These tools have been developed to help the user view an image more clearly. Inevitably, this influences the questions the researcher will ask of the material. For example, the image on the screen lends itself to the

CAMERA
CAMERAMAN'S CAPTION SHEET
OLYMPIC KINEMATOGRAPH LABORATORIES, LTD.
BRITISH PARAMOUNT NEWS DEPT.
SCHOOL ROAD, LONDON, N.W.10

FORM NO. 5. BOX NUMBER: _____ DATE MAILED: _____

CAMERAMAN: GEMMELL SOUNDMAN: _____
STORY COVERED: MANCHESTER V WALTHAMSTOW LENGTH EXPOSED: _____
PLACE OF EVENT: OLD TRAFFORD GROUND MANCHESTER HOW SHIPPED: _____
STOCK USED: ILFORD EMULSION NUMBER: _____ PROD. No.: _____

VERY IMPORTANT! Write Plainly—Spell Names Correctly—Use Typewriter if Possible

SCENE NUMBER	COMPLETE DESCRIPTION OF SCENES
	<p>THE GAME WAS PLAYED IN HALF A GALE WITH MANCHESTER UNITED WINNING THE TOSS AND KICKING DOWN WITH THE WIND.</p> <p>MANCHESTER THE LEAGUE CHAMPIONS JUST MANAGED TO DRAW ONE ALL.</p> <p>SHOTS TAKEN IN THE FIRST HALF OF BOTH ENDS SHOWING THE MANCHESTER GOAL IN FORE GROUND.</p> <p>SECOND HALF SHOWS PLAY DOWN AT THE WALTHAMSTOW GOAL.</p> <p>NO GOALS WERE SCORED BY END AND VERY LITTLE PLAY BECAUSE OF THE POWERFULL WINDS.</p> <p>HALF TIME SHOWS PLAYERS LEAVING THE FIELD.</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> </div>
	<p>WHICH OTHER SOUND NEWS REELS COVERED STORY: <u>ALL OPPOSITION</u></p> <p>.. .. SILENT</p>

ITN Archive

Cameraman Dope Sheet, British Paramount News, Issue 2289 (release date 5/2/1953)

detailed interrogation of a commentary script e.g. deciphering words which have been crossed out, rather than the simultaneous comparison of several commentaries. An awareness, that the creation of the image and the medium it is delivered on can influence the nature of enquiry by shifting the user's visual frame of reference, is essential.

The way the user reaches these images has also changed the traditional discourse with the material and the skills required to interrogate it. In more traditional research, a large collection of source material, usually in the same medium, is identified, located, researched and examined over a longer period of time. This process provides for greater contextualisation or orientation for the user. It is clear how one piece of material relates to and informs another and the route between them is very much a linear one.

By contrast the digital collection is often reached by means of a word on a search engine or a URL on a related website and can be accessed in a matter of seconds. A huge amount of data is panned and sifted during this process. As a result, the digital resource interrogated may have only been informed by a phrase or word. This together with the speed of access often leads to a loss of context along the digital route and a sense of disorientation in the user. Add in the fact that documents of all shapes, textures and sizes have been reduced to relatively standardised images, the temptation to keep travelling is great. Previously inaccessible documentation is now within easy reach via the digital highway but in using this route the researcher trades in context for speed.

The provision of online contextualisation of digitised material is therefore vital. In the case of the newsreel

production documents, the project now realises the necessity of explaining to our users what they are looking at and providing case studies on how the material can be used via the BUND. The user of digital resources is now required to make links across different media and the BUNSP seeks to foster this ability, initially through the provision of streamed audio interviews with newsreel cameramen. These additions together with the re-design of the BUND should make the digital journey easier and encourage our visitors to stay.

Re-visiting our assumptions about digitisation has helped us to see how easy it is to conflate the original object with the image and highlight the subsequent failure to appreciate how the discourse between the researcher and the primary source material has changed. As a provider of digital resources it is essential to acknowledge that the user requires greater guidance and that if this is not provided then the resource will simply not be used. The much vaunted 'democratisation of history', predicted by the crea-

tion of digital resources, will not happen just because they are there. Through the implementation of lessons learnt from its own history, the BUNSP hopes to ensure that the potential of its digital resource is fully realised.

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4th Round FA Cup

February 1953

Final Score

Manchester United 1

Walthamstow Avenue 1

(Manchester United won the replay 5-2)