

Helping build the catalog:

My experience as an intern for the American Film Institute

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I applied for an internship with the American Film Institute because I wanted to get experience working for an archival institution involved in historical research and publishing information in an online database. I wanted to learn more about historical research, metadata and content management systems. I also wanted to get experience doing remote work, because I see myself doing more of that in the future. Although there were unexpected complications that resulted in AFI having fewer resources to offer me, I was still able to achieve all my goals.

Site Description

My internship was at the American Film Institute (AFI) in Los Angeles, California. AFI has a filmmaking school that offers graduate-level education in filmmaking. Their archives include oral histories and various materials related to film production (scripts, music scores, set designs, etc.). AFI maintains and is actively expanding an online catalog of American films with detailed information about their production history (AFI, n.d.-a). The catalog is what me and the other interns were helping with.

I worked with the catalog manager and the catalogers who input research data into the catalog, as well as with other interns. During the term of my internship, all three catalogers were unexpectedly laid off because AFI did not receive expected grant funding, so the catalog manager was the only non-intern employee I had contact with.

The catalog is an online database that I can log into with my user account to access metadata records for thousands of films. When I enter data into the system, the database keeps a record that I inputted the data, and I can submit the data for review by the catalog manager

before it is published. The database has a lot of features I did not need or use for merging and data cleanup, but the metadata entry features that I did use are straightforward and easy to use.

I did not do a lot of data entry at first. I checked the catalog to see if any data had already been entered, and if it hadn't, I did research on the film. The research I did helped the catalogers know what metadata to put into the database.

Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcome I

Under the guidance and mentorship of the AFI Catalog Manager and Researchers in a remote, online environment, be taught how to conduct in-depth historical research and cataloging for film documentation, using digital resources. I was taught how to conduct in-depth historical research for film documentation, and I researched several short films, gathering information about publication date, copyright, release date, plot synopsis, cast, etc. The intern manual and orientation video gave clear instructions on what websites to search for information, and what type of information to search for, as well as how to organize my findings. The catalog manager and catalogers were available on the chat to answer any questions.

During the final week I was able to do data entry for the catalog and write out descriptions of the history of the films. Cataloging helped me better understand how much research was needed. A better explanation of the content of the catalog would have been helpful from the start. I should have asked about doing this earlier. The summer term went by so fast. The catalog manager was traveling a lot and the unexpected layoffs meant she had more work to do than expected.

Learning Outcome II

Receive training regarding the ongoing preservation of American films. The American Film Institute was the first organization to create an index of American films, starting in the 1960s (AFI, n.d.-b). At that time, films had been produced in the United States for almost 50 years, but there were few efforts to preserve them. Early films, made on cellulose nitrate, were very unstable and prone to deterioration. A study commissioned by the Library of Congress in 2013 found that about 70% of American silent films made from 1912-1929 are completely gone because of deterioration due to neglect or deliberate destruction (Pierce, 2013). However, there are records of their existence in entertainment industry magazines and newspapers. Although AFI does not preserve the films themselves, they do maintain a catalog that is an authoritative record of the films that have been produced. Archivists in many institutions around the world rely on this catalog to help them identify the films in their collections. Because of the catalog, AFI plays a key role in the preservation of American films.

Learning Outcome III

Gain experience in data analysis, aggregation and database technologies. I searched several digital collections to find information on the films, including the Library of Congress's Media History Digital Library and the Lantern search platform which makes it easier to search this collection (Lantern, n.d.). I searched for film copyright information on the Library of Congress website and the digitized 1912-1939 Catalog of Copyright Entries for Motion Pictures at Project Gutenberg (Library of Congress, 2024). I also searched news articles, books and magazines on ProQuest, Newspapers.com, and Google Books. I also searched various other websites when more information was needed, being sure to discriminate between whether a source was primary or secondary and how reliable it was. I became familiar with different search tools such as surrounding a phrase in quotation marks, narrowing down to a specific date, and

sorting search results from oldest to newest. The weekly meetings and group chat were valuable resources, as I was able to share and receive tips from the other interns about how to research more efficiently and locate difficult-to-find information. The catalogers were able to help a lot with this too, and it was disappointing when they were laid off, but we tried to make up for their loss as best we could by helping each other. The catalog manager was helpful as well, but the catalogers were a huge source of knowledge about film history.

Learning Outcome IV

Develop expertise in digital communication applications, research practices and methodologies and remote project management. I learned to use the Microsoft Teams app, which I had never used before. I used it alongside other Microsoft applications: OneDrive, Outlook, and Word. The Teams app has a chat feature and a video call feature which I used extensively. I also found a way to create to do lists for myself within the Teams interface, which helped me stay organized. Learning to do research with a team was very rewarding, as I described above. Again, I think I could have learned more sooner if I knew more about how the research would be applied to the database. However, I could have sought out this information myself, as the database was always available to me.

Learning Outcome V

Observe and contribute to, through hands-on experience with digital interfaces, a high-profile, federally-funded inclusion initiative. The research I did was for the “Behind the Veil” project, which focuses on women and BIPOC individuals in the history of film. I helped research films that women were involved in making and tried to find more information about their involvement with the films. The project lost federal funding due to President Trump’s cuts

to the National Endowment for the Arts a few weeks into my internship, which was unfortunate, but also helped me realize how grants, politics, and communication with other organizations is so critical for keeping an institution like AFI alive. The catalog manager told us in our meetings how she was involved in conferences, writing grant proposals, and coming up with various ways to get funding. She also described how individuals at conferences came up to her and thanked her for the work we are doing with the catalog.

Conclusion

Management Style

What management style did your site supervisor exhibit, was it effective, would you recommend any change in approach? My site supervisor had a hands-off management style. She provided basic guidance and was available to answer questions but expected us to do the work on our own. The manual and instructional video she provided at the start were very helpful for getting started and setting expectations. I also appreciated her “round robin” approach to weekly meetings, where the expectation was that each person took a turn speaking so that everyone had a chance to report and ask questions.

Looking back, I could have benefitted from more one-on-one coaching, but that was my fault for not asking more questions. The sudden layoffs affected this as well, because there were not as many employees available to help me.

Technology

What kinds of technology did you use to conduct your internship? Do you have any recommendations for technology that would have improved either communication with the site supervisor or completion of your assigned tasks? The main software I used was Microsoft Teams, Word, and OneDrive. Teams was very useful for the virtual teamwork setting. I had never

used it before, so I could have used some training, but I figured out the basics soon enough.

There were a lot of features on Teams that we didn't use at all, but the ones we did use were easy to find. I was already familiar with Word and OneDrive, and I used my knowledge to help my team streamline our use of Word to gather screenshots from our research.

The presence of multiple possibilities for communication – group chat, individual chat to the supervisor, and weekly video calls – made it difficult for me to decide when and where I should ask my questions. Mostly I just brought it up in the weekly video call because I couldn't decide, and that usually worked out.

The database used for the catalog was straightforward and easy to use, however it frequently had errors that would temporarily shut down my access to the website. This is an ongoing problem that the site supervisor is aware of and trying to work with IT to fix, but it will take time.

Responsibilities

Explain your responsibilities briefly and then explain the issues that were of great concern to your site supervisor. For example, if you were coding EAD, was there an emphasis on quantity? Quality? My supervisor had a list of items that we needed to look for about each film. It was understood that we likely wouldn't find all of them for each film. She also had a list of places we needed to look for this information. We were to take screenshots of our findings and save them into a Word document – one for each film. Research documents needed to be organized in chronological order and have as much relevant information as we could find on each film.

She said at the beginning try to gather data for at least three films per week. I found this to be a very low threshold as I usually did more than three. I think it is a good number, however,

for someone new to doing online research. Also, some of the films have way more information available than others so they take longer to do.

Most Difficult Aspects

What were the most difficult aspects of the work experience for you? Were these the "normal" difficulties of working in a new environment? Did they have to do with working "virtually" (if you were doing a virtual internship)? What steps could be taken by you or the site supervisor, to improve the experience?

Communication was probably as good as it could be for a virtual internship, but I know if it had been in person, I would have had more opportunities for one-on-one learning, because these can happen spontaneously in the workplace when observing someone.

Learning who to talk to with what questions was difficult the first few weeks, then the other people got laid off, so I only had one person to go to for questions.

My biggest problem was difficulty logging into the catalog. After asking for help, I was able to remedy this by making sure my browser cache was clear every time I logged in. Again, this is an ongoing problem that the catalog manager is aware of.

Most Valuable Courses

Which of the courses you have taken were of most value during the internship?

During this internship, I used a lot of the genealogy research skills I learned in my undergrad. I have spent a lot of time searching through digitized historical records on online databases, so a lot of this research was second nature to me.

Courses from my graduate school program that helped with this internship included INFO 203: Online Learning, which taught me how to navigate new technology and work virtually with a team, and INFO 204: Information Professions, which helped me understand

different roles in an organization, how organizations are structured, and how to plan and organize projects. My courses on Oral History, Metadata and Photo Preservation also helped me understand more about why the work I was doing was needed. My other graduate courses that included group projects also helped prepare me for this.

Courses That Would Have Helped

What other courses (or course content if you can't identify a specific existing course) would have helped you with your internship? It probably would have been helpful if I had taken INFO 285: Applied Research Methods before doing this internship, as there was a lot of research involved. However, the research was very basic, and I already had historical research experience. A class on film preservation or the history of film would have been useful as well, but I did not need to have an extensive knowledge of the field to be able to find the requested information.

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