

Asian Film Archive's journey in preserving social media as cultural knowledge

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ABSTRACT

In this poster, we discuss the topic of preserving a cultural institution's social media for cultural knowledge. We review approaches associated with preserving social media and apply this analysis by examining Asian Film Archive's attempt at this. We also look at issues and challenges that have surfaced, as well as offer recommendations in response.

Keywords

Social media, preservation, cultural knowledge, cultural institution

1 INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have been around since the early 2000s. As interactions on social media platforms take place in high volume and velocity, and technologies continue to evolve rapidly, it is even more pressing than before to preserve digital artefacts as well as knowledge generated on social media.

Arguably, it is those in the archives profession [1] that should have the most scholarly interest in this topic, as well as a heightened awareness of the volatile nature of social media and the need to preserve both the digital artefacts and knowledge emerging through interactions on social media. However, as technologies are usually used in context, this may require archivists to have a deep understanding of the contexts in which they are deployed and used.

Archiving content on social media platforms is a complex endeavour. Firstly, there are certain unique interactions, transactions, and content that are a result of distinct features of each platform. Unlike publicly accessible web pages, content on social media platforms are often hidden and visible only to those on an individual's social network. Of course, this also raises the question about privacy, the ethics of keeping information, and the blurring of boundaries between public and private records.

Secondly, any attempt to capture social media posts as well as its context is technically challenging. Algorithms cannot do so easily, especially for platforms such as Facebook, which changes its appearances and have complex algorithms driving its newsfeeds

and what appears on respective timelines. Thirdly, there is also the question of determining a meaningful timeframe for archiving, as the open and participatory nature of many social media platforms implies that anyone who has access to a post can participate at any point via commenting, sharing, liking, and so on.

2 PRESERVING ASIAN FILM ARCHIVE'S SOCIAL MEDIA

Asian Film Archive (AFA) is a non-profit organisation founded in 2005 and based in Singapore. Its mission is to save, share, and explore the art of Asian cinema. Apart from celluloid film reels, videotapes, and digital film files, AFA also preserves handbills, film magazines, behind-the-scenes photos and footages, scripts, storyboards, and other film paraphernalia.

In wanting to be more than a mere repository and a resource library, AFA actively engages with its stakeholders and audiences through contemporary, innovative, and experimental public programmes [2]. With that, AFA aims to attract and maintain audiences' interest in film heritage. Beyond film screenings, AFA has recently embarked on curating inter-disciplinary programmes, exploring the intersections of film-visual art, film-music, film-literary world, film-theatre, and film-dance. These programmes have significantly increased the amount of public discourse on social media.

AFA launched its website in April 2005 at www.asianfilmarchive.org, which was captured 187 times over the years by the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, with the earliest instance on May 30, 2005. Since the majority of the content was mostly static, the sites have been very well preserved and are still accessible at old.asianfilmarchive.org.

On the social media front, AFA primarily uses Facebook (@asianfilmarchive) and Instagram (@asianfilmarchive). It also has a Twitter account at @AFA_Archive, but the discourse is relatively low, except for some small spikes during international conferences.

In trying to preserve as much discourse as possible, AFA explored the use of paid social web real-time monitoring services like

Brand24, Mention, and Social Express (Brandtology). These services provide similar functionalities at a price range within AFA’s budget. Most importantly, they were the only ones with data export functionalities, which is crucial for preservation. However, as these services were not able to provide historical data more than three months old, we explored other tools and services.

Most of the social media archiving tools that AFA has explored are meant for archiving tweets, such as twarc, TAGS, and Storify. This might be because archiving Twitter is relatively straightforward compared to other social media platforms. However, only capturing tweets would represent a small proportion of the public discourse about AFA’s work. This is because, as mentioned, most of the conversations on Twitter that involve AFA occurred when AFA organized the 19th South East Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA) Conference in 2016, with the hashtag #SEAPAVAA19.

There was also significant chatter when AFA staff attended international programmes, symposiums, and conferences; for example, the Joint Technical Symposium (#JTS2016), International Association of Film Archives (FIAP) Congress (#FIAP72 and #FIAP2016), FIAP Film Restoration Summer School (#FRSS2016), and Association of Moving Image Archivists conference (#AMIA16).

For a while, lentil [3] by NCSU Libraries looked like a viable tool to archive Instagram posts. But in 2016, Instagram changed their public API significantly. As the search for a better tool to preserve Instagram posts continue, manual archiving using Webrecorder seems to be the only recourse.

A case in point: State of Motion, AFA’s annual programme held in conjunction with Singapore Art Week, features a roving bus-tour exhibition that delves into Singapore’s cinematic history through the critical exploration of historical film locations. Art works are commissioned at each film location. Participants are encouraged to use the hashtag #stateofmotionsg when they post pictures on Instagram, and a total of 330 posts were created. Webrecorder was used to record the Instagram tags explore page, and its access is available for public replay at webrecorder.io [4].

On the Facebook front, the biggest challenge in properly archiving Facebook discourse is maintaining privacy, due to non-public posts. Moreover, Facebook users do not always use hashtags. Interactions with AFA photo or video posts may be indicative of sentiments, which is the main reason Facebook posts are archived. Hence, AFA’s Facebook Page data is downloaded periodically as part of our archival effort.

Previously, AFA experimented with a Facebook group as a platform for dialogue and discussions to continue online after an offline event. Nevertheless, there was hardly any discourse in its two years of existence. The group has since been archived (on March 20, 2017), thus freezing all activities on the group. However,

the “download all data” feature provided by Facebook only supports Facebook Pages and not Facebook groups. So again, Webrecorder was used to record all the posts in the group.

Table 1 provides a summary of the tools explored to preserve and archive posts on different social media platforms.

Platform	Tool/service
Twitter	twarc, TAGS, Storify Mention, Brand24, Webrecorder
Facebook	Mention, Brand24, Webrecorder, Facebook
Instagram	Lentil, Mention, Webrecorder

Table 1: Tools considered for each social media platform

3 NEXT STEPS

AFA is currently working on organizing and consolidating the various archived social media and websites, which will be made publicly accessible via an online catalogue.

Besides that, AFA is exploring the more advanced features of Webrecorder. Other tools and services that are also being considered include Archive Social [5], Social Feed Manager (SFM) [6] and DocNow [7].

To capture social media content as cultural knowledge effectively, there needs to be substantial investment and costs set aside to develop a customized and sustainable solution for preserving and archiving social media. The solution does not merely involve technicalities; there also needs to be technical, archival, and institutional know-how.

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