
So You Want to be an Audiovisual Archivist

Carla Arton, AMIA Education Committee Co-Chair

So you think you might want to be an audiovisual archivist but you're not exactly sure what that entails. To help you better decide if this is the right career path (before you go and invest your time and money) we have laid out some of the basics that you should know about the field, such as the current professional climate, educational expectations, and how the profession is expected to develop. An overview of the larger archiving profession can be found on the Society of American Archivists website, [Here, titled "So You Want to Be an Archivist"](#)

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A (very) Brief History of Audiovisual Archiving

An audiovisual archivist is a specialized archivist that has an in-depth understanding of the history, [conservation](#), [preservation](#), [restoration](#), [access](#), and [curation](#) of audiovisual formats (ie. film, magnetic video and audiotape, optical media, digital media). The moving image archiving profession had a meager start in the 1930s when large institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, British Film Library, and the Cinémathèque Française started accumulating commercially released films for artistic and cultural posterity. Recorded sound archiving started in 1899 at the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv and was later accompanied by larger institutions such as the Library of Congress and the British Institute of Recorded Sound in the 1940s and 1950s.

The profession however did not fully establish itself until the 1980s and 1990s as more representatives of studio, museum, government, and academic institutions (as well as passionate collectors) organized to provide a unified voice for the preservation of moving image and recorded sound history. This also happened to coincide with the expansion of the home movie market (with the introduction of VCRs) as well as the Information Technology (IT) boom. The former reestablished entire studio archives as commercial assets and the latter opened up a whole world of restoration and access possibilities. Since then the industry has become more entwined with library science and information management. The specialized time sensitive needs of AV collections are also becoming more widely acknowledged. Additionally, audiovisual collections have begun to expand into video games and [born digital](#) content.

For further information on the current state of audiovisual preservation see Mike Casey's recent article, [Why Media Preservation Can't Wait: the Gathering Storm](#), published in the January 2015 issue (no. 44) of the IASA Journal.

Types of Positions

AV archivists come in many forms and from many different types of institutions. The main areas most positions fall under are conservation, access, preservation, and/or management. For more established institutions with greater staffing and financial resources the below breakdown applies best.

Smaller or newer institutions however may only have one or two positions to handle most of the below mentioned responsibilities possibly due to the size of the collection, needed additional infrastructure, and/or finances. There are also positions to be found at for-profit companies that do outsource preservation, restoration, and/or access work for cultural institutions.

- **Entry level positions** such as processing technicians, project archivists, shippers, and assistant archivists tend to handle the initial processing of collections including surveying, organizing, conditioning, rehousing, cataloging, preparing items for playback, access digitization, shelving and pulling of items, and shipping.
- **Mid-level positions** such as archivists, reference specialists, catalogers, vault managers, librarians, coordinators or project managers, consultants, and curators have more project management experience. They are usually focused more on one aspect of AV preservation such as working with the public on research projects, coordinating preservation, collection acquisitions, or programming.
- **Specialists/Engineers:** These Mid to Upper level positions may also specialize in technical skills such as photochemical printing, timing, digital restoration, sound preservation, video preservation, database management, and digital asset management.

- **Upper level positions** are usually presidents, managers, or heads of large archives or special collections, as well as preservation or restoration service companies.

To get a better understanding of what the current job market is like please look at our jobs site, [Audiovisual Archiving Jobs](#), for job descriptions and hiring expectations. The site will also give you an idea of the amount of jobs currently being posted in the industry. There is also an outline of recommended recorded sound position types provided in the [State of Recorded Sound Preservation in the United States report](#), pgs. 104-107.

You can find some interviews conducted by the NYU MIAP program with various professionals in the industry about their jobs and career paths [here](#).

Types of Employers

There are a wide variety of non- and for-profit employers for audiovisual archivists. They include, but are not limited to:

- Commercial and corporate archives, such as studios or stock footage companies
- Government funded state and federal archives
- Regional archives and historical societies
- University and college libraries or special collections, media or library science departments
- Local or public school libraries
- Museums
- Radio and Television stations
- Film and Music festivals
- Performing Arts organizations
- Advocacy groups and NGOs

- Vendors for physical hardware, preservation services, and/or software development
- Research institutions
- Self-Employed professional researchers or consultants

Types of Collections

The type of formats and the content within each collection will vary greatly depending upon the collecting policy of each institution. A commercial institution such as a studio will contain items from its own production catalog or from other studio catalogs it has acquired. Each museum or special collections library will acquire based on the interests of its patrons. Regional archives will collect based on what was produced in that region, including commercial and home movies.

Audiovisual collections, regardless of collecting policies of the institution, will likely also be acquired with paper or photographic materials, or artifacts (such as microphones, awards, etc.). Some collections may be predominantly paper but have home movies or audio interviews. Commercial moving image collections of 35mm or 16mm films will likely have posters, scripts, or other ephemera. Some institutions will separate these collections out and send them to different divisions while other institutions will keep the entire collection together. Thus, AV archivists should be comfortable with handling other special collection formats and materials.

Future of the Profession

As in other areas of library science and archiving, audiovisual archiving and preservation is becoming more and more digitally minded, partially due to born digital acquisitions (media that was originally created digitally). Born digital collections and digitized collections (for preservation and access) are cared for by digital asset management teams. This does not however mean that AV archivists will no longer be needed.

The volume of AV materials that remain in existing repositories, as well as the materials yet to be acquired from personal and commercial collections, will ensure the need for a specialized AV archivist. There will also always be a need for providing improved access through database management and curated exhibits. These, as well as improved preservation and restoration techniques will continue to keep AV archivists busy for many generations to come.

Qualifications

Growth and professionalization have gone hand in hand for AV archiving, as they have for many other fields. It is most common now for those starting careers in AV archiving to obtain a Master's degree first. Those looking to attain senior leadership positions may need additional credentials, such as a PhD, MBA, or additional Master's degree in a specialized subject area.

Graduate degree programs aimed at preparing students for professional careers in AV archiving typically offer either an MA in a field like Archival Science, Museum Studies, Communications/History, or Media Studies, or a Master's in Library and Information Science (MLIS) or a Master's of Science in Information (MSI) with specialization in audiovisual materials, preservation administration, or materials conservation. There are pluses and minuses to each type of degree. For example, if you are interested in more of an academic setting working in a university library you may want to pursue an MLIS/MSI from an accredited Information Studies program. If you are interested in jobs that involve more curatorial work or historiographical research within moving image collections, a media studies degree with archival emphasis may be a better fit. Many programs, regardless of what degree they offer, complement theory-based classroom education with hands-on work and training in the form of archival internships or practicum experiences. A current list of programs offering a Master's degree in AV archiving can be found [here](#).

Some people with other kinds of training or professional experience have entered the AV archiving field without a specialized degree. In most cases, they do so by pursuing certification or professional experience through volunteering or interning at archives or special collections. However, a Master's degree is increasingly a required qualification for even entry-level positions in AV archives.

Student Chapters

AMIA has student chapters that may be able to provide additional information on the structure of each program and the student experience.

Internship/Experience Opportunities

Internships, fellowships, and volunteer opportunities abound throughout the field. AMIA offers internships and fellowships sponsored by various institutions. Additional opportunities can be found in scholarships and professional awards and grants on our site. Volunteering at a local archive is a great way to get a feel for the industry before committing to a degree program.

Associations and Professional Development

The best way to get a feel for what the profession is really like, what direction it is moving in, and the types of people within it is to get involved with the associations through either a membership, the list-servs, or attending a conference or event. The most accessible associations for any level of knowledge would be the [Association of Moving Image Archives \(AMIA\)](#) and the [Association for Recorded Sound Collections \(ARSC\)](#) in the United States. Both AMIA and ARSC offer full voting membership to individuals, without specific application criteria while other associations, such as [International Federation of Television Archives \(FIAT/IFTA\)](#) or the [International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives \(IASA\)](#), are primarily aimed at institutional/professional members, and may not offer voting rights at the supporting individual level. A further list of [associations](#) can be found on our site.

Another way to become more familiar with the industry and its history is to read some of its literature or to watch some of the [media](#) that has been produced about it. Additionally, you may wish to visit our [calendar of events](#) to see if something is being programmed near you (conferences, exhibitions, film festivals, symposiums, etc.) or watch our [YouTube and Vimeo playlists](#) of events and webinars posted by others online.

Introductory Readings

- Bamberger, Robert, and Samuel Brylawski. *The State of Recorded Sound Preservation in the United States: A National Legacy at Risk in the Digital Age*. Washington, D.C: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2010.
- Frick, Caroline. *Saving Cinema the Politics of Preservation*. New York: Oxford UP, 2010.
- Gracy, Karen F. *Film Preservation: Competing Definitions of Value, Use, and Practice*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007.
- Houston, Penelope. *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives*. London: British Film Institute, 1994.
- Slide, Anthony. *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1992.
- [These Amazing Shadows](#) (2011) trailer