

“Broadcast Yourself”: Putting Iowa State University’s History on YouTube

Michele A. Christian and Tanya Zanish-Belcher

Overview of Repository

The Special Collections Department was created at the Iowa State University Library in 1969. Its mission is to identify, select, preserve, create access to, provide reference assistance for, and promote the use of rare and unique research materials that support major research areas of Iowa State University. The department maintains active public service, outreach, and tour programs for both on- and off-campus groups, including academic classes, the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, the Honors Program, ISU Learning Communities, Extension and 4-H groups, and K-12 student groups such as National History Day. The seven-member department serves more than 150 researchers per month and responds to nearly 15,000 reference requests annually, in addition to hosting hundreds of other on-site visitors.

The collections include some 17,000 linear feet of archival materials documenting agriculture, natural history, statistics, veterinary medicine, and women in science and engineering. Included are manuscript collections donated by individuals and organizations not necessarily connected with ISU but reflective of the university’s mission. The department also includes the University Archives, consisting of official records and faculty papers; more than 1,000,000 photographs; and 50,000 rare books dating back to

1475, with strengths in agriculture and the natural sciences. Finally, there are 10,000 motion picture films (dating from 1940 to 1980), the majority produced by the Iowa State Film Production Unit and WOI-TV. The collection also includes film footage that is related to manuscript collections, such as the Roswell Garst Family and the Rath Meat Packing Company.

Business Drivers

As noted above, the Special Collections Department has always been focused on outreach and public service. As efforts continued to digitize important parts of the collection, we at the department were pressed to find a new way to share this material outside of the Library's website, and Web 2.0 appeared to be a viable solution. Of particular concern was access to the department's 10,000 16mm motion picture films. With hundreds of millions of international users watching videos each day, YouTube was the obvious choice of the video sharing sites. We use YouTube in conjunction with our other Web 2.0 tools, such as Flickr and Scribd, which allow us to share photographs and documents easily. These tools have increased the department's visibility, not only outside of Iowa State University but, surprisingly, also on campus.

YouTube offered us a way to provide access to a collection that is not easily available to researchers. Until now, anyone wanting to watch the films had to visit the department's Reading Room and use specialized equipment for viewing archival film. YouTube gives the department an outlet to highlight many of the unique films in the collection and also removes the onus of providing storage and access for digitized films through the Library's servers. These films provide a means for ISU alumni to rediscover and share some of their moments as students by watching campus-related films.

Setting the Stage

After experiencing success using Flickr for its photograph collections, we decided that using YouTube would be an excellent way to provide access to the department's films. We organized the account in January 2008. The first

technical issue was to determine how to best upload the films to YouTube. For the past few years, the university's Information Technology Services had been digitizing and transferring the department's 16mm films to DVD. Departmental staff had requested that some films be digitized based on the frequency of reproduction requests from patrons and researchers. As a general policy, a duplicate copy was always created for the department's collections as well. Because these films were already in a digital format, we selected them as the highest priority for YouTube. Once these initial films were loaded, we selected additional films based on varying factors, such as patron use, content and appeal, and requests. We have thus far focused on uploading films documenting Iowa State University, the state of Iowa, and agriculture.

Because we selected YouTube as our platform, we followed their requirements and suggestions for uploading videos. YouTube has limits on the size and length of the videos to be uploaded; the video cannot be more than 1 GB in size or more than ten minutes long.¹ YouTube also offers suggestions about what formats are most compatible, including .avi, .mov, .mp4, and .swf.² We elected to use .mp4, because these files could also be loaded to the department's iPods, which were purchased for patrons to listen to oral history interviews.

Because most of the films in the department are more than ten minutes long, we used software to edit the films into segments and create the .mp4 files. We selected Adobe Premiere for editing the films. Once we loaded the video into the computer, we edited the films into ten-minute segments. We created a simple set of text templates for titling each segment, which included the call number and title of the video and the segment number. We inserted text at the end to let the viewer know how he or she could acquire a reproduction.

After saving the segments, we loaded the videos into YouTube. Loading them backward, with the last segment uploaded first, puts the video segments for each film in the right order. When loading the films to YouTube, we included brief metadata about each film, such as the title, date, description, and names of key individuals in the film. YouTube also allows for the tagging of each video, and we chose terms as basic and

specific as possible so researchers could easily locate what they needed. YouTube offers many features, such as allowing comments and ratings by viewers and allowing users to embed the videos to websites. To deter spammers from leaving comments, we selected the option to have the viewer comments be approved before they are posted on the web. We also chose not to allow the videos to be embedded in order to control their use.

Results

We have been pleased with the results thus far. After uploading more than fifty films to YouTube, patrons had viewed our videos more than 52,000 times and viewed our channel more than 4,000 times. According to YouTube's Insight program, the videos have attracted YouTube viewers from around the world, including countries such as Mozambique, Russia, Uruguay, and Indonesia. So far, sixty individuals have subscribed to our channel; we gain approximately two to four new subscribers each month. The department has also become "friends" with Iowa Public Television, Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area, ISU Athletics, ISU News Service, and ISU Extension. In YouTube a friends list is a contact list.³ We chose to use the friends list as a way to connect the department's channel viewers to channels of other cultural institutions and Iowa State University units.

Some of the most popular films include several produced by the Iowa State University Film Production Unit and CINE Eagle Award winners, *When We Farmed with Horses* and *The Last Pony Mine*. Patrons have visited these two films 2,846 and 1,225 times, respectively. Other films that have received numerous hits include episodes of television shows produced by WOI-TV. The Fort Madison Prison episode of *In Our Care* is the most viewed video on the department's YouTube channel; it has received 7,144 views. It received nearly 5,000 views its first day and continues to get a few hundred views each month. Episodes of *The Magic Window*, a local children's show, are also popular. We had included several episodes of *The Whole Town's Talking*, a show from the 1950s dedicated to helping communities talk about some of the more pressing issues they faced,

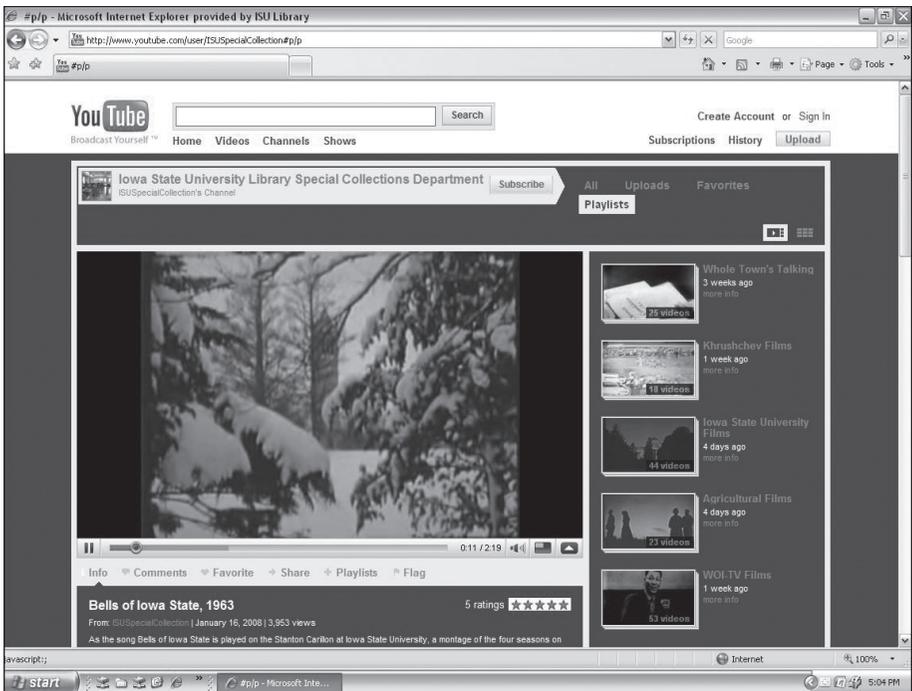


Figure 1: “Bells of Iowa State” video on the ISU Library Special Collections Department YouTube channel.

including school consolidation, youth recreation, school funding, and Native American rights.

Thus far, the videos have been well received, and many viewers have contacted the department to ask for more episodes to be added. The best comments have come from those who seem to be emotionally attached to the videos. Several comments were made about the episodes of *The Magic Window*. They include:

I loved this show as a kid. And that was some pretty snappy dialogue between Betty Lou and the puppets. My favorite line is “It would be a shame if you died and missed Christmas!”

Oh my gosh!! I am so happy to find this on You Tube. I remember watching this when I was little!!! So funny to see it now that I am older. . . . Thanks again for posting it.

Thanks so much for posting this video. I grew up with WOI-TV and especially enjoyed the morning show with Betty Lou. I always tried the crafts she did but they never came out very good. . . . Thanks for bringing back an early childhood memory for me. I LOVED "Magic Window." Just the theme song alone made my day!⁴

Many viewers have also contacted the department to request reproduction copies, and the department has experienced a major increase in the number of requests. Before uploading these films to YouTube, we had received, at the most, no more than a dozen requests each year. Currently, between three and six requests per month are received and we have adjusted our policies accordingly.

Throughout the ISU campus community, the department's YouTube channel has received some positive press, including being advertised to Iowa State University alumni through the ISU Alumni Association's newsletter. Articles have also appeared in the university's newsletter for faculty and staff, and the films' accessibility on YouTube have been emphasized in presentations for Alumni Weekend.

Challenges

The department has faced several minor challenges since starting the channel on YouTube. The first was the dedication of staff time to select and work with the films as well as keeping abreast of YouTube's new features. While the department has seven staff members, only two spent time working on these efforts. The department head supervised the project, prioritized film for digitizing, and provided needed feedback and support. The archivist spent considerable time learning software and managing the process of selecting and uploading film, which could be between fifteen and thirty minutes of prep work for the software to convert the file to .mp4. It takes approximately one to one and a half hours per ten-minute segment for the software to convert the file and an additional fifteen to thirty minutes to upload the video to YouTube. For a busy department, this dedication of staff time is a significant commitment.

The department's channel frequently received spammed comments. Many of these comments were invitations to other sites that were oftentimes

obscene. This issue was easily handled by selecting the option to approve all comments before they went live and became available to all viewers.

Our most significant challenge concerns copyright issues. The majority of films were produced by the university and, consequently, the department has rights to reproduce and make them available. However, in some cases, nonexclusive reproductive rights had been given to a third party such as a distributor. This was especially true for the most popular films, such as *The Last Pony Mine* and *When We Farmed with Horses*. Although patrons were unable to download a high-quality film, the distributor remained convinced that the availability of even a low-resolution copy on the web would result in decreased demand for fee-based reproductions by the distributor. In reality, one could argue just the opposite—that a YouTube copy with an explicit link to the distributor could actually increase the film’s visibility and marketability. After seeking guidance from the university’s Information Technology Services, we decided to maintain access to the films in their entirety.

Another copyright challenge had to do with the uploading of the department’s one episode of *Seventeen*, a popular local teenage dance show from 1958 produced by WOI-TV. YouTube decided to remove or mute videos containing Warner Music Group (WMG) music after negotiations with the company broke down in December 2008.⁵ Unfortunately, WMG owned the copyright to many of the songs the teenagers danced to in the video, although they were of extremely poor quality, and in February 2009 the video had a copyright challenge. To be compliant, we could either remove audio for these selected songs or remove the entire film from YouTube. For the time being, we have decided to remove the film in its entirety but may add the portions back at a later date with the copyrighted sound removed. This is simply another Web 2.0 learning experience.

Lessons Learned

The greatest lesson we learned from this experience is the amount of time, effort, and labor involved with digitizing films, uploading them, and making them available on YouTube. While not difficult, it did require staff research and experimentation to learn the process, as it is not simply uploading an

already existing file. Despite the time commitment, this experience has been worth it. As an outreach tool, YouTube has provided the department with a worldwide audience we never would have had otherwise.

Next Steps

We plan to continue to expand efforts with YouTube, as well as Flickr, iTunesU, and Scribd. In particular, we will focus on adding to YouTube some of the department's more critically acclaimed films, such as digitizing and uploading the remaining episodes of *The Whole Town's Talking*. The first several episodes were digitized using a grant from the National Television and Video Preservation Foundation (NTVVPF). The series was funded by the Ford Foundation with the goal to "achieve a new and broader sort of audience participation program—through the involvement of the whole community. . . . It is trying to show that it can use the colorful limelight of a television setup to spark entire communities to a discussion of their problems." The discussions touch not only on school consolidation but also on the relationships between farm and town dwellers, services in the community for youth, and manufacturing.

We will also explore digitizing more of *In Our Care*, a series of documentaries filmed inside Iowa's mental hospitals, prisons, and other institutions. The series was awarded the National Sylvania Television Award for Production Excellence. These films provide perspectives and issues faced by Iowans in the mid-twentieth century that may enlighten those facing similar issues today.

Finally, we will be working collaboratively with the university's Information Technology Services, which has recently entered into a partner account with YouTube. We will also explore opportunities relating to grant funding and curriculum development utilizing film and video footage.

Notes

- ¹ “YouTube Help,” Google, <http://www.google.com/support/youtube/?hl=en> (accessed December 14, 2010).
- ² “YouTube Help,” Google, <http://www.google.com/support/youtube/?hl=en> (accessed December 14, 2010).
- ³ “YouTube Glossary: Friends,” Google, <http://www.google.com/support/youtube/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=95408> (accessed May 18, 2009).
- ⁴ “Magic Window with Betty Lou” (12/16/1955), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMdoI0DeYDU> (accessed December 14, 2010).
- ⁵ Richard Koman, “YouTube Takes Down Thousands of Fair-use Videos,” *ZDNet News & Blogs*, <http://government.zdnet.com/?p=4484> (accessed April 13, 2009).