

Archive, Access, Action:

Findings of 'Cymru Anabl', a National Library of Wales
Screen and Sound Archive project

September 2024

*'Cymru Anabl' was a project by the National Library of Wales
Screen and Sound Archive in partnership with Disability Arts
Cymru, Hijinx Theatre Company and TAPE: Community
Music and Film, with the support of the BFI National Lottery
Screen Heritage fund.*



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THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES

Background

In September 2023 staff at the National Library of Wales Screen and Sound Archive started a new project, *Cymru Anabl (Disabled Wales)*, funded by British Film Institute (BFI) National Lottery funds. In addition, Disability Arts Cymru, Hijinx Theatre Company and TAPE: Community Music and Film were partners on the project.

With the social model of disability at its core, the title of the project is intended as a reflection on the status of a nation which is currently inaccessible to a very large number of people, and as a national archive, the same is true about us.

Choosing disability and accessibility as the theme for the project, it was designed with significant consideration of staff capacity and the relatively short project duration of one year. As such there were three broad branches to the project's activity, namely learning and research; engagement; and assessment and exhibition.

The project

Originally, there were four members of staff involved in the project, but by the start only two would be involved. Therefore, the project activity was a little less than initially hoped for.

Nevertheless, the project managed to fulfil many of those early aims, and primary among those were the creation of new connections and direct engagement with disabled people.

This is a summary of the project activity.

Learning and Research

- The project staff undertook disability awareness and Deaf awareness training in order to prepare for the project.
- A series of virtual meetings were held so that the project staff could get to know and understand more about the work of the project partners, including best practices.
- There was a lot of research into the archive collections, in order to understand which items had already been digitised and which portrayed disability or were created by disabled people.
- There was also a period of desk research for scholarly work and more broadly from the heritage sector about archives and accessibility.

Engagement

- The bulk of the project's activity was hosting public workshops to engage directly with disabled people and archive users on issues of accessibility and archival representation.

- As part of this process we also engaged with experts, such as a BSL consultant and an expert in the field of archival accessibility, in order to expand our understanding and improve our offer.
- A task was developed for NLW volunteers so that they could also be involved in the project, and blogs were written about the work of the project for the NLW website to ensure the sharing of information.

Assessment and Exhibition

- Descriptive subtitles and audio description were commissioned for a number of film and video items from the Archive's collections, and from this a package of films was also created and promoted through Film Hub Wales to film exhibitors across Wales.
- Also, an event will be held to celebrate the project, share findings, and show films.
- In addition, by analysing the conversations we had over the course of the project it is possible to identify and outline priorities for future work, as can be found in this document.

Feedback

When undertaking the above activity, the project staff set out to outline, analyse and summarise all the feedback received from participants and partners.

There was a lot of emphasis on the importance of suitable and efficient systems and staffing, especially when considering the user experience. For example, a lot of attention was drawn to search systems and the importance of metadata that is thorough, accurate but also clear. There was reflection on the importance of diversity within the workforce at somewhere like an audiovisual archive, to ensure that life experiences were reflected in the service as well as the collections.

Several participants also noted that significant resources are needed to support efficient systems, whether that be staff or funding, and that any cut to those resources can negatively affect access and accessibility.

There was a desire for leadership from important organisations in the fields of accessibility, through work that encourages access and curiosity, including identifying what the 'gateways' are to archival film. Hand in hand with this there was hope for an emphasis on education and engagement, in a school context but also far beyond formal education institutions.

Common feedback from disabled participants was that these efforts must be sincere and must include disabled people in the process. Collaboration must be improved,

internally to organisations but also between organisations, in order to strengthen efforts and share information about inclusive working.

We held one workshop, online, with a focus on the Deaf community. A number of important things emerged from this session in particular, and it is crucial to note and recognize that Deaf people do not necessarily consider themselves disabled.

There are a number of specific obstacles for Deaf people when trying to discover the archive, and that mainly stems from the lack of information about, or provision of, a BSL service. Until some basic access adjustments take place, such as a much wider use of BSL and subtitles, the archive is for hearing people only.

Priorities

One of the questions we asked the project participants was "what is the film archive of the future like?". This was a question designed to think positively about next steps, and as one would expect, there were a lot of varied ideas from the participants.

The list below represents the material priorities for work to improve the accessibility of the Screen and Sound Archive, based on the engagement work of the project which is summarised above.

A Digital Online Player

Having access to films and videos through an online player would mean improved access for a wide range of people, including disabled people.

It's of vital importance that a player of this sort is able to host multiple feeds of different types of access materials (e.g. subtitles, audio description).

It's important that this sort of player also includes features to adjust playback (e.g. tools to adjust speed and brightness as well as volume).

Strong Search Systems

An efficient searching system based on thorough, reliable and comprehensible metadata is vitally important in ensuring a satisfactory and accessible user experience.

Filters on search results should be detailed and correct, and where possible there should be means to adjust how the results and information are displayed in order to best suit the needs of the user.

Staff Support

There must be enough resourcing and support of staff in order that they can work efficiently. This should include a variety of policies that reflect a prioritisation of accessibility.

Staff should be allowed the time to support users to get to know systems, and that should be based on their own thorough understanding of systems and collections.

Collaboration

Collaboration, institutionally, with communities and with external partners, is vitally important to improve and increase accessibility and inclusion.

In addition to projects and formal collaborations, there should be sufficient encouragement of the public and specialised groups to interact with the archive.

The archive's work can be a basis for sharing information more broadly about matters of accessibility and inclusion.

Afterword

In a workshop, one of the participants described archival footage as 'precious'. They are absolutely right, of course, and there is a great threat that these precious films and videos will continue to remain locked away, instead of being available to a much wider range of people.

An original hope at the start of designing the project was to create an internal action plan for improving the accessibility of our collections. Under current circumstances - a period of austerity across the heritage sector - it is impossible to put a firm timetable on any of this work.

Our intention with this document is therefore to be able to use it as a guide for the Screen and Sound Archive when designing future work, ensuring that access and accessibility priorities are central to our plans.

We also hope that this document demonstrates transparency and allows the public to keep us accountable in this line of work.

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