We know Ryan White
by Katherine Marie Morrison and Andy Uhrich

Abstract
The video essay has transformative potential for digital archival practices. Our project knits together critical approaches to digital archival practices, creative interplay between objects and description, and an examination of Ryan White’s treatment by broadcast television news. Our contribution of a multimedia video essay and statement is intended to visualize the intellectual efforts of this First Monday issue. This written piece situates our video essay as a mode of inquiry into the fragmentation of a distributed digital archive, local cataloging and metadata practices, and how descriptive practices shape how we understand HIV/AIDS. We address the context for the WSJV News Collection at the Indiana University Libraries Moving Image Archive, describe the process and labor involved in creating this video essay, and consider its implications for digital archival practices.

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Statement
How has the HIV/AIDS digital archive, as a theoretical concept and mechanism for knowledge-making, come into existence? Where do the artifacts, documents, and practices that form this archive originate? Archival collections of materials related to the HIV/AIDS crisis structure historical and aesthetic understandings about the long 1980s and 1990s. These collections, however, originate as shards distributed across fragmented places. All that archives can do is provide a means to reassemble these bits. This reassembly is always labor-intensive, often opaque to audiences, and ultimately artificial.

Our project demonstrates these troubling and concealed characteristics of digital archives [1]. By creating a video essay out of an archival collection’s local news segments about Ryan White and HIV/AIDS in northern Indiana we bridge archival reassembly, digital technologies, and the political narratives that have framed Ryan’s precarious place in the HIV/AIDS canon. This video essay specifically critiques the interplay between objects and their metadata, the metonymic powers of metadata, and how these descriptive practices shape how we understand HIV/AIDS. Digital technologies like film scanning and video editing allow us to build new archival description and cataloging tools. In a way that visualizes the intellectual efforts of this First Monday issue, we created this video essay to imagine how critical approaches to digital archiving can be incorporated in traditional processes of archival description.

Our piece should be understood not as a singular exemplar of an emerging multimedia practice, but rather as part of a longer tradition of new media artists remixing archival materials. Although we chose no one artist or piece on which to model our work, we stayed particularly conscious of the genre of the video essay in moving image scholarship. The video essay is an aesthetic and epistemological tool made possible entirely through digitization practices. [in]Transition, a Society for Cinema and Media Studies and MediaCommons publication dedicated to the video essay, is in fact founded on the exploration of “the ways in which digital technologies afford a new mode of carrying out and presenting film and moving image research” ([in]Transition, n.d.). By contributing a video piece to this issue of First
Monday, we hope to encourage other researchers to experiment with media and art as a legitimate scholarly activity. Experimental media pieces such as the video essay elicit different questions and pedagogical opportunities than purely textual scholarship. In particular, new media scholarship begets a muddle of epistemic and moral uncertainty (what am I looking at? What does it mean? How do I feel about this?) that textual scholarship may not.

Artists, activists, and archivists (not mutually exclusive terms) working from the HIV/AIDS epidemic have engaged archival moving image media for more than three decades. “We know Ryan White” applies the lessons prescribed by this lineage to techniques of creative and critical archiving. We are using the form of the video essay to iteratively reflect on our roles and responsibilities as processing archivists. Our project deploys a different set of affordances than HIV/AIDS activist documentary filmmaking and new media artworks that appropriate this rich body of documentation. Our video essay appropriates archival content from a broadcast news television station in Indiana. The essay was born out of a specific instance of processing this archival content into an institutional repository of moving image materials, and how we needed to describe this content differently than existing repository collections. Because our project originates from such particular circumstances, it is crucial that we situate the project in a larger history of archival and new media activism.

Radical documentary filmmaking became an important mode for HIV/AIDS activists to represent direct action and protest in the late 1980s and early 1990s as evinced by ACT UP affinity groups DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television) and Testing the Limits Collective. As Roger Hallas explained, their video works “refused the structures of address” perpetuated by broadcast television news [2]. Television news’ structures of address included centering of a homogenized mass audience, a simulated intimacy between the anchor and audience, and a situated placement of documentary footage (interviews with citizens on the street, b-roll, etc.) as removed from this intimate encounter [3]. Lucas Hilderbrand additionally argued that video documentaries by DIVA TV composed counter-surveillance evidentiary efforts in the wake of police brutality at ACT UP protests [4]. Our project highlights the use and critiques the description of television news’ modes of addressit originates from a specific archival collection that does not contain community-produced activist video. The bulk of DIVA TV’s video content documented actions in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago [5]. A significant number of DIVA TV’s camera originals (raw footage) and edited segments have been processed into the AIDS Activist Videotape Collection, 1985–2000, at the New York Public Library (NYPL). These tapes have not been digitized for public use; NYPL only offers access to view these materials on-site.

Videographers represented in the collection, particularly Alexandra Juhasz (1995), have addressed the politics of the HIV/AIDS archive as a process of remediation through community-based video. Significantly, Juhasz has also addressed possibilities to remediate the “the Internet [as] an unorchestrated archive of fragments of all our selves” through editing and curatorial practices [6]. Although our project does not use community-produced video in the sense Juhasz articulated, it does reassemble fragments of a particular HIV/AIDS narrative in a midwestern community. Offering up this video essay online engages a mode of curatorial production that continues the remediation of the HIV/AIDS archive. Efforts such as Visual AIDS and Queer Media Database Canada additionally demonstrate how the intersection of activism, new media art, and archives can reassemble the fragmentation of bodies online. “We Know Ryan White” should be understood in this larger genealogy of cultural production and critique.

Instead of critical mediamaking created in the moment of protest, like the efforts of DIVA TV, our video essay was made decades later — after what was news became an archival document. The essay originated from an archival collection’s processing to address the problems of archival description. When we processed the WSJV News Collection in 2018, we found that we wanted to describe the collection (comprised of videotapes and handwritten logs) in ways that a traditional archival finding aid could not. The video essay allowed a reflexive way for us to build contextual commentary and emotional response into archival moving image practices.

This project originates from the WSJV News Collection at the Indiana University Libraries Moving Image Archive (IULMIA). WSJV, a now-defunct broadcast television news station based in Elkhart, Indiana (15.5 miles east of South Bend), operated with major network affiliations from 1954–2016. The collection appears to contain WSJV’s entire videotape news library from 1981–2011. Long running stations like WSJV found that keeping a tape library was quite useful for ongoing news production. As such, the library tapes each contain about 40 components that vary from “raw” in-the-field footage with no edits, to partially edited voiceover/sound bite segments, to more fully edited news story packages. The effect while watching these tapes from start to finish is of an informational and chaotic sense of history. It is crucial to understand that these are not recordings of actual news broadcasts, but bits that could be assembled into new broadcasts. The videotapes contain a confusing disarray of content. In this way, we are finding shards of HIV/AIDS material strewn throughout a source that is already fragmented.
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Handwritten logs including producers’ descriptions of each component accompany every videotape in the collection. These brief logs, written in a shorthand useful for the WSJV news crews, structure the watching experience with added layers of context. Interpreted as metadata describing the video segments, one can see how they serve a specific user-community with specialized needs focused on imagery and existing local narratives. For example, one 1989 log entry reads “Benton Harbor Housing — women processing forms, exterior of dilapidated house + interior.” The description highlights the visual imagery. One can imagine potential future uses of these images in news stories about residential blight and precarious economics. The first line of description, “Benton Harbor Housing,” would be significant for a WSJV news editor who recognizes Benton Harbor as predominantly black Michigan community 38 miles northwest of South Bend, Indiana. One can begin to see how “dilapidated house + interior” could become shorthand for Benton Harbor in the WSJV videotape news archive. This example demonstrates how systems of oppression are embedded in the logs’ anodyne language practices. This slippage between the imagery of the video clips and their written description is nowhere more prevalent and challenging than WSJV’s holdings of Ryan White and HIV/AIDS-related content.

HIV/AIDS in American public memory is predominantly framed through coastal metropolitan areas like New York and San Francisco. One of the most publicly fraught cases of HIV/AIDS, however, played out in north central Indiana. In 1984 Ryan White, a then-thirteen-year-old boy from Kokomo, Indiana contracted the virus through a blood transfusion meant to treat his hemophilia. When he attempted to go back to school following his diagnosis, the Western School Corporation banned him from attending (U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration, 2016). He and his mother, Jeanne White-Ginder, fought a much-publicized legal case for his right to attend school over the 1985–1986 school year. The timing here is critical, as American news stories covering HIV/AIDS doubled between 1985–1987. In 1986, White’s battle accounted for three percent of all American news stories about HIV/AIDS (Brodie, et al., 2004). From a national perspective, White was as much celebrated for his bravery as he was framed as a victim to the discrimination of an ignorant community. In 1988 a People cover story decried Kokomo as failing “the litmus tests of human decency” (Friedman, 1988).

In 1990 historians have considered the more complex local perspective on Ryan White in Howard County, Indiana. Notably, the Howard County Historical Society launched the carefully considered Ryan White Oral History Project in 2010 to “examine this event’s impact, both positive and negative, on the county, and to illustrate that history must be understood in terms of its inevitable complexities and nuances” [7]. Nancy E. Brown has published rigorous historical research about the Ryan White conflict and the context of local and nationally available HIV/AIDS information (Brown, 2018). Still, Ryan White holds a troubled place in the canon of HIV/AIDS public memory, mourned as a martyr on the largely unspoken agreement of his straightness and whiteness [8].

When we discovered the large amount of Ryan White content on the WSJV tape logs, we were immediately curious to see the local television news reporting on the event as it unfolded. We wondered if the segments would mimic the existing national narratives or provide something to complicate the story. Would they humanize him or do the opposite? We discovered both to be true. The proximity of the local perspective grants Ryan White a more immediate presence. On the other hand, this proximity grants the same immediacy to his detractors and their ignorance.

We started our project with a general purpose of questioning what we really know from “the archive” as opposed to what we know from archives circulating in larger knowledge ecologies, especially digital and online spaces. We used the video essay to address two key issues we articulated while processing the WSJV News Collection: we need to describe this collection in ways that traditional finding aid descriptive practices obscure, and we need to show the process by which digital archival collections are curated and highlighted. Archival theorists, particularly Michelle Caswell, have described plural and reflexive modes of community archives as a means to fight the “symbolic annihilation” of archival description [9]. While IULMIA contrasts the anti- or quasi-institutional characteristics of grassroots community archives, we took seriously the charge to uncover loci of power in our processing decisions as archivists for a major institution. We initiated our video essay with this charge in concert with our commitment to creative practice as a legitimate mode of archival processing.

We aimed to do this in two ways: first by re-presenting the chaotic and informational sense of history the unedited WSJV tapes provide, and second by showing slippages between video segments and their written description. We intentionally did not distinguish any aims as “purely” aesthetic, and as such the aesthetic effects of the original WSJV news videotapes guided our entire endeavor. The video essay is informed by visual and material culture studies, media archaeology, and digital humanities studies focused on the archive’s knowledge-producing functions as inherently aesthetic projects. In sum we endeavored to make this video essay a possible model for demonstrating the epistemological dimensions of digital moving image archives.
Our labor involved with making this video essay revealed provocative key findings. The first step of casting the net for segments in fact involved several parts. First, we had to read through the tape logs and transcribe them so that we could locate and pull tapes for digitization. We were not able to use OCR programs to automatize this process due to the format and many different handwriting styles on the logs (Figure 1). The transcriptions were organized in a spreadsheet with the tape date, relevant timecodes, tape number (an identifier assigned by WSJV news crew members), and barcode (an identifier assigned by IULMIA staff upon acquisition) for recall purposes (Figure 2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STORY</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TIME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elkhar Police + Fire Wase Negotiations</td>
<td>6-27</td>
<td>6:42 00:46 - 1:29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crop + Field Update - Farm Fields</td>
<td>6-28</td>
<td>1:46 1:45 - 2:32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muck Fire - Fireman</td>
<td>6-29</td>
<td>1:35 2:35 - 4:19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6-30</td>
<td>1:33 4:33 - 6:07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 AIDS Law Indiana - Palmieri</td>
<td>7-1</td>
<td>1:39 6:23 - 8:02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Mishawaka Water Update</td>
<td>7-7</td>
<td>1:33 8:15 - 9:47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawn Sprinkling, power transformer cut, washing, sprinkling</td>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>8:47 10:02 - 18:51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mishawaka 1 HO Status</td>
<td>7-11</td>
<td>2:13 11:04 - 18:17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pump motors splice in water line</td>
<td>7-14</td>
<td>1:32 13:30 - 15:02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caro's Detcliff Donut</td>
<td>7-14</td>
<td>1:52 15:17 - 17:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Foster Care Home - Donut</td>
<td>7-19</td>
<td>1:53 17:23 - 18:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orchard drought - Palmieri, apples on trees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dem. Convention Tonight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keynote Speaker, Opening night</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan Shaw Environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Conference at SBN Aviation</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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In total we located and transcribed 120 log entries related to HIV/AIDS, of which about 30 of these directly featured Ryan White. Our principles of selection for pulling tapes prioritized local Ryan White segments (many of the Ryan White segments were pulled from national news network programs), HIV/AIDS segments specifically mentioning local figures or places, and admittedly provocative descriptions. This final principle resulted, for example, in us digitizing a segment logged as “Prostitutes-AIDS (Midwest), nighttime, prostitutes on streets, AIDS lab work, needle in arm.” This reveals our biases for seeking out certain segments that confirm our existing understandings of television news and sensationalist imagery. This understanding, in turn, is informed by our existing conceptions of how television news sensationalized HIV/AIDS to the public. This reflexive context troubles any assumption that the archive consists of authentic “bits” waiting for interpretative assembly. Everything already is mediated through multiple layers of intervention — the worldviews of different people over time selecting and describing entities.

After identifying relevant tapes through their accompanying logs, we digitized segments using IULMIA’s in-house digitization deck. The tapes we selected were all U-matic, a professional tape format that predates VHS. Some of these tapes were in poor condition and could not be used for the final project, most regrettably in the case of a tape containing footage from Ryan White’s funeral. Some shards could not be reintegrated or reassembled. Issues like media deterioration presents the real impossibility of restoring some things — thus the archive can never be truly whole. This realization is not new to archivists, who have for some time theorized the inherent incompleteness of the archival record (Millar, 2002). “We know Ryan White” does not offer complete answers but continues this line of questioning for digital moving image archives specifically. How do we explain undigitizable items in the digital archive? Do we include the glitch-y digital file? Or do we include a note indicating the item could not be digitized? Do we even include these in search returns?
We digitized tape segments according to emerging archival standards — 10-bit video depth, Matroska container, and lossless FFV1 video codec. To compile and edit the segments, we converted these files to .mp4 for Adobe Premiere. We digitized more segments than we could conceivably use in the video essay, so as we watched the playback we further whittled down our list of segments to feature. We found some of the segments were literally not unique (often b-roll on one tape appeared in a more complete package on another tape) or were not visually or informationally unique enough. Although these repetitions are not represented in the final project, they did inform our understanding of certain major themes across the Ryan White and HIV/AIDS segments. Repeated footage showing Ryan participating in archetypal childhood activities like riding his bike or throwing a baseball, for example, emphasized his presentation as a “normal” American boy. In the end we used 14 different segments from 12 U-matic tapes.

Across these segments, several major tropes emerge: first, the argument that Ryan was unfairly inflicted with an incurable disease despite the fact that he was a normal, white, presumably straight boy; second, that HIV/AIDS awareness and education were necessary for the Indiana region to slow the spread of the disease; and third, that Ryan’s hometown of Kokomo saw his right to go to school and exist in opposition to the town’s health and safety. None of the WJSV segments, digitized or not, challenge the homophobia and racism endemic to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Some cover more populist practices of HIV/AIDS activism such as education and awareness campaigns. We ensured that these voices appeared in our final video essay.

A significant problem as this project developed was how to combine the video segments with their log descriptions. We knew we wanted to layer scans of the logs on top of the video segments to suggest how the descriptive metadata frames the watching experience of these tapes. Visually reconciling these things was more challenging. We were able to cite as inspiration some video-based creative expressions from archival research such as Zain Alam’s work for the South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive (SADAA), pieces collected by [in]Transition and Catherine Grant, and more unwieldy new media video work by artists like Mark Amerika. From these sources we derived the idea of layering the text semi-transparently on top of the video. This helped solve the visual imbalance between the “low-fi” videos and the high-resolution scans of the logs. Still, the first draft of the video essay appeared too awkward and wooden. To visualize a more dynamic relationship between the log and the video, we decided to animate the logs across the video segments. This allowed us to layer a sense of interplay between the text and image, present a close reading of word choice in the logs, and at times almost entirely mask the video with the textual description. One poignant example highlights the metonymic metadata “AIDS KOKOMO KID.” This entry describes content that includes local parents justifying their decision to pressure the Western School Corporation to bar Ryan White from entry. Their banal cruelty parallels the starkness of “AIDS KOKOMO KID.” The placement of the phrase on the parents’ heads suggests this could be their thought bubbles. Another wrinkle in this content was these parents’ name labels edited into the segment. We erred on the side of privacy and blanked their names — a judgment made not necessarily out of sympathy for the subjects, but concerns about our recognition of legally legitimate (if not just) concerns of our home institution. We felt a strange sense of irony in obscuring their names, which the news producers provided, while highlighting the producers’ choice not to grant Ryan White a name in the tape log. The imposition of this description across the parents’ faces plays on this irony. In this instance we chose to embody our roles as archivists working for a major university rather than any incidental roles as activists. We recognized the precarity of our non-permanent jobs and, quite simply, our need to keep our jobs. Admitting this fact is a recognition of our own capacity for perpetuating what we can think of as archives’ “structures of address,” in the language of Roger Hallas — structures of assumed subject privacy and infamy, and adherence to institutional norms. This example highlights the epistemic uncertainty and moral ambivalence we wanted to inject into our work.

We relate the choices we made to create our video essay as a call for greater transparency in documenting how this distributed digital archive of HIV/AIDS histories and stories is being constructed from the collections of a wide number of institutions and individuals. Moreover, we argue that creative activities like the video essay form allow for a critical commentary on archival practices that get hidden or actively removed in the adherence to the standards of appraisal and description. As archivists we need to critically consider our judgements about subject privacy and institutional risk, transcription and metadata, and content selection. For example, how can the archival processor of a collection of HIV/AIDS material include their critique of what they are inventorying in an official catalog record? Although total remediation of the HIV/AIDS archive is impossible, digital tools like the video essay allow us to alternatively describe and critically frame the archival collections and shards. We can structure digital archival description in new ways to visualize the incompleteness of the archive. The video essay allows us to build critical responses to the foundation of best archival practices. Archivists in and out of the moving image preservation world can use these tools not only to expand upon, but also build critique into the archival process itself.
Video essay

Figure 3: Opening screen of “We know Ryan White”.

The video can be found at [https://vimeo.com/371729022](https://vimeo.com/371729022)

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Notes

1. By “digital archives” we mean collections of digitized and born digital archival records. Our project specifically addresses the digitization of physical materials — videotape formats and paper records.


References


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**Editorial history**

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