**Earth in Vision - BBC coverage of environmental change 1960-2010**

**Summary**

*Earth in Vision* explores environmental change through the BBC archives. This AHRC funded project is based in the Open University's Geography Dept. and runs from October 2013-September 2016. Partners include broadcasters, filmmakers, archive and environmental education organisations.

The next decade will see the release of very large bodies of digital broadcast archives in parallel with the generation of new tools that allow richer use of media online. These developments will have consequences for any field of contemporary history, but are of particular significance for the environmental field. Framings of environmental change issues have typically been narrow and static, and have reinforced a policy field around these issues often unable to address the complexity and uncertainty of long-term questions. Archive and web developments could combine to allow for more imaginative future responses to environmental change issues. However without a self-critical and open consideration of the 'digital ideologies' embedded in the tools and practices that mediating institutions develop for users' work with these enormous bodies of cultural content, there is a danger that the narrow and unproductive repertoire of environmental framings that is currently dominant will become further reinforced. This project responds directly to this urgent challenge.

The project focuses on the archive of environmental programming collected by the BBC since 1957: the start of International Geophysical Year, and a key date in the emergence of a global environmental imagination. It is informed by a pilot study, which selected, annotated and cleared limited use rights for around 100 programmes/50 hours of programming. Using this sample of programmes it will critically examine their potential as resource for the making and debating of environmental histories in the context of imagining and planning for environmental futures. It builds on principles of co-production and social learning, and aims to support more plural and dynamic accounts of environmental change.

**Research aims, objectives and questions**

The project overarching aim can be phrased as a question: *How can digital broadcast archives inform environmental history and support public understanding of, and learning about, environmental change issues?* To answer this question we will explore:

- the achievements and limitations of existing accounts of environmental discourses and mediations over the last fifty years

- the technical, institutional and cultural considerations that emerge as institutions prepare for substantial digital broadcast archive releases

- the practices and expectations of users of digital broadcast archives

- the ideas and responses of people engaged with environment and development issues (including learners, teachers, engaged publics)

This work is broken down into four sub-questions and associated objectives:

*1. To explore: In what ways does engagement with digital broadcast archives serve to revise and pluralise accounts of environmental history and politics?* We will generate a contextual history that draws primarily upon the archive content and associated materials (scripts; paper archive; interviews with makers/presenters). The prime outputs that meet this objective will be a scholarly monograph in the form of a freely available e-book and an academic journal article (e.g. Environmental History).

*2. To investigate and summarise: What uses and expectations do publics have of digital broadcast archives, and how will they impact upon the way they engage with and act on environmental change issues?* The rights regime around broadcast archives do not allow us to open the archive for use by the general public (except in still-rare cases where content has been cleared). Hence drawing on the exclusive opportunity generated by the OU-BBC relationship we will work with the pilot study BBC broadcast archive content with volunteers drawn from the OU student body (the UK's most demographically diverse) and the OU teaching community who will act as 'proxy publics'. We will iterate between our own work with the material and interviews and focus groups with this group in order to generate outputs in the form of an industry-relevant report and an academic journal article (for the digital humanities academic community). This objective will be pursued according to principles of co-production, and participants will be invited to feed back on drafts of the web design, e-book and also attend the final conference.

*3. To consider: What technical and cultural challenges and opportunities are presented to institutions that will be expected to have responsibility for, or will work with, online environmental digital archives (schools; universities; museums; media organisations)?* To approach this we will draw on a diverse body of expertise through the selection of our advisory board and wider workshop groups. We will interview our partners in advance of the first of two workshops, and "snowball" to extend our reach. The industry oriented report and the workshops and conference themselves will be the main means of achieving this objective.

*4. To understand: How can deeper knowledge of the production of past and present environmental understandings support more plural and dynamic imaginings of environmental futures?* This is an ambitious objective, and hence we have the most experimental ideas about achieving it. We will work with rich media materials and strong creative talent to produce a body of outputs and dissemination/engagement techniques that will allow our research to make its own journeys through the world by means of the website, the e-book, the pop-up exhibition and associated material.

Team: Principal investigator: Joe Smith, Co-investigators: George Revill and Zdenek Zdrahal; Research Associate and Project Manager: Kim Hammond. The team is based in the Dept. of Geography/Open Space Research Centre, The Open University, with the exception of Zdrahal who is Senior Research Associate in the OU's Knowledge Media Institute.

Contact: project manager kim.hammond@open.ac.uk / 01908 274066