

Digital Collections Assessment of Library of Congress's "Inventing Entertainment"

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The Library of Congress's Collection "Inventing Entertainment: The Early Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings of the Edison Companies" highlights the film and sound works produced by inventor Thomas Edison. This Collection represents one of the 338 Digital Collections offered by the Library of Congress and, as such, one of the 19 sourced from the collections of the Library of Congress's Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division.¹

After selecting "Inventing Entertainment" from the Library of Congress's "Digital Collections" webpage, the user lands on this Collection's homepage. Though this homepage immediately offers an abundance of information its consistency, organization, and color scheme are based on basic design concepts that are quick for most internet users to learn: Information is introduced hierarchically (top to bottom, left to right), the structure is clarified through the use of tables and frames (where menu bars and navigation charts are placed on the top and left of each page), and the color scheme is focused and subdued (mostly black text on a white background, with blue text links that are simply underlined on the mouseover, and "highlighted" windows offset with a simple light-grey background). Furthermore, the format of this page is consistent with all the other Digital Collections homepages; Once a user has learned how to navigate one Collection they have learned how to navigate all. Below the website's consistent header (featuring the Library of Congress logo, a search bar, and a website map) is the Collection's title, followed by links to the Collection's three sections: "About this Collection," "Collection Items," and "Articles and Essays," followed by a light-grey inset window of "Featured Content" which provides 5 quick-link highlights from the Collection.²

The frame "About this Collection" offers a brief one-paragraph description that introduces the items in this collection, its subject Thomas Edison (1847-1931), the Library of

¹ It is also of the institution's 25 Digital Collections that feature digitalized film or video. Though numerically low, this percentage of representation is significant. Due to the cost of digitalizing and preserving analogue film and sound, many archival institutions opt to exclude AV materials from their websites. See Amelia Ishmael, "Archivist Interview : Brian Belak of Chicago Film Archives (February 1, 2019) for IS5801AO.

² This inset window can be opened/closed via a blue +/- button in its top-left corner.

Congress's future goals for additions to this Collections' website, and a rationale for its historical significance. Below this paragraph is a subsection that provides a brief introduction to "The Paper Print Film Collection at the Library of Congress," which houses many of the films in the "Inventing Entertainment" Collection where Thomas Edison deposited the Edison Kinetoscopic Records for copyright in 1893.³ The "About this Collection" frame is headed with an Accessibility feature which offers a text-to-speech "Listen to this Page" option.⁴ The menu bar to the left of this frame includes details regarding "Rights and Access."

"Collection Items" includes links to 431 items: comprising 383 images (mostly thumbnail images and still frames to support video links), 330 videos (digitalized from 332 original films), 78 audio files (digitalized from original recordings), and 21 links to articles and internal webpages. To navigate the collection, the website offers a variety of options: The Search Bar above provides an option to conduct keyword searches limited to "This Collection;" A menu on the left-hand side offers users capabilities to "Refine your results" based on options such as online availability, original format, date ranges locations, affiliate collections, and subjects; Additionally, the Collections' items can be viewed as a List, Gallery, Grid, or Slideshow; sorted by Title, Date, or Shelf Order. Though this page offers a potentially overwhelming amount of information, the variety of selection-editing options successfully aid the Collection's accessibility. For example, when visiting this site for the first time, I vaguely recalled that a few years ago I was searching for a film produced by Thomas Edison titled "The Kiss" but couldn't find its date, so I decided to see if I could find it here. I entered "The Kiss" into the Search Bar and received 4 possible items; The list's top item was it. Noting that the Items' titles are each blue, I selected the title "The Kiss" from the Collection, which linked to the Item's page, where a video player immediately presented me with the option to "Play" the digitized version of this adorable 44-second-long film from 1900 (or even to "Share" and "Download" it!)⁵ along with

³ "Moving Image Research Center: Motion Picture, Broadcasting & Recorded Sound Division," *The Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/mopic/>

⁴ ReadSpeaker's goal towards accessibility is noted on their website: "available to a larger population of Internet users, such as those with literacy difficulties, learning disabilities, reduced vision, language learners, the growing elderly population, and anyone else looking for a simpler way to access digital content on the go." See *Read Speaker*, <https://www.readspeaker.com/>. Individual item pages *do not* have text-to-speech capabilities.

⁵ For "educational and research purposes" only. See "The Kiss - Rights and Access," *Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/00694229/>

detailed information about this item (including a link to its MARC Record). Provided that I was able to immediately find and view this specific film within moments, I would conclude that the collection is easily and effectively navigable.

Finally, the “Articles and Essays” offers internally produced items such as a Timeline to Thomas Edison’s life and work, Biographies, three essays focusing on specific aspects of this collection, and a Bibliography, as well as three externally published articles on Thomas Edison.⁶

The “Inventing Entertainment” Collection is an open-access point to a repository for research, rather than an exhibition.⁷ The Library of Congress utilizes the advantages of Digital Collections and digital publications to exercise its ability to be an “inside-out library” (Dempsey) drawing attention to the unique items in its collections, and making them more accessible to external communities (Conrad). Though it is possible to “discover” items, and to browse through different Collections without a destination, the Digital Collection website is organized as a finding aid that perhaps best facilitates directed inquiries. Its strength, I think, is largely in supplementing users’ knowledge rather than introducing the general population to new information. Its methods are directed towards making its collections accessible.

Works Cited:

Conrad, K. M. (2017). Public libraries as publishers: critical opportunity. *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 20(1).

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Dempsey, L. (2016). Library collections in the life of the user: Two directions. *LIBER Quarterly* 26(4).

<https://www.liberquarterly.eu/articles/10.18352/lq.10170/>

“Inventing Entertainment: The Early Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings of the Edison Companies,” *Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/edison-company-motion-pictures-and-sound-recordings/articles-and-essays/>

⁶ The “Inventing Entertainment” collection’s linked “Articles and Essays” section is more comprehensive than many other collections that I explored, which potentially further illustrates the historic significance of this particular collection to the Library of Congress and the amount of research that has been conducted on this subject.

⁷ For an example of a digital exhibition format, see Danielle Rios, Dianne Bohach, Jennifer Lam, and Bobbi deMontigny’s “Race to the Moon,” (*Digital Public Library of America*, <https://dp.la/exhibitions/race-to-the-moon>) which offers a linear navigation through 62 digital items that are presented to illustrate or supplement a didactic essay (for all ages of users).