
The Archivist, the Scholar, and Access to Historic Television Materials



by Margaret A. Compton

It is my hope to be able to prove that television is the greatest step forward we have yet made in the preservation of humanity. It will make of this Earth the paradise we have all envisioned, but have never seen.

—Professor James Houghland, in *Murder By Television*
(Cameo Pictures Corp., 1935)

Professor Houghland could have been a television archivist. He had devotion to the medium and hope for the future, and he even believed television could preserve humanity. Seventy-two years later, the question is, can humanity preserve television? As an archivist, I say the answer is yes, though the full scope of the work may be unknown to scholars. Those seeking more television programs to study may ask, “Why isn’t this series on DVD? Does this episode still exist, and can I view it?” The truth is that a great deal of television’s history has been lost over the years, but, despite this, more programs exist than you may know of, and many areas of television remain unexamined. Archivists are eager to guide you through their holdings and explain why not all of television is necessarily easy to get to, but that efforts expended in this direction can benefit both archivist and scholar in the twenty-first century.

To turn the old adage around, “the more things remain the same, the more things change.” Television remains television, but the vehicles for content delivery have changed radically from television sets with rabbit ears, a rooftop antenna, or cable, to computers, iPods, and cell phones. Television archivists must keep up with the changes not only regarding what programs will come to the archives, but in what formats they will arrive.

Television historian William Boddy astutely states that “contemporary television studies struggles to come to grips with new academic contexts and a shifting object of study.”¹ The archivist must come to grips with new institutional contexts (such as changes in mandate, in location, or place in institutional priorities), and a shifting object of funding to obtain and maintain the materials scholars seek to study. For the amount of television programs extant and those being discovered every day, there are not enough resources available to preserve this heritage.

Since its invention, television has been and remains one of our most fragile cultural assets. To highlight this fact, the Library of Congress published in 1997 a five-volume *Study of the Current State of American Television and Video*

*Preservation.*² The study includes testimony from television pioneers, archivists, and scholars offered to a Library of Congress panel in March 1996 in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C. These television scholars and archivists discussed how little preservation of television programming has been undertaken to date and elaborated upon an assortment of problems that complicate preservation efforts: chemical and physical problems with the carriers on which programs were recorded, the devastating loss of news footage and entertainment programs, difficulty with access, lack of preservation funds, and equipment obsolescence. Since the publication of the five-volume study, image preservation has improved tremendously and archivists are facing the challenges inherent in preserving and providing access to this mechanically dependent, chemically based historical product.

The fragility of the material is a significant problem. Unless a kinescope recording on 16 mm film was made of an early live broadcast—and that reel of film saved—that program no longer physically exists. Two-inch videotape debuted in 1956 and was so expensive that networks repeatedly reused tapes to save money, erasing thousands of early programs (e.g., Johnny Carson's early *Tonight Show* tapes). Yet unique kinescopes and programs on two-inch videotape do exist in archives as valuable windows into early television programming. Three-quarter inch U-Matic videotape, long a staple of broadcasting for its economical and portable nature, was used in thousands of TV stations. It is now one of the most ubiquitous and simultaneously most endangered broadcast formats in archives due to its inherent fragility—it was never designed to be stored long term. As local television stations and network affiliates expanded in the 1980s and 1990s, entire archives of local news film, tape, and VTRs were dumped in landfills to free up station space, confounding archivists hoping to save both programs and equipment. Dump or dumpster rescue missions are one way these materials made it into the archives. Keeping older VTRs in good working order or replacing them, or getting new master tape stock becomes increasingly difficult as companies such as Sony and Ampex slow or discontinue the manufacture of “legacy formats” while shifting their product line toward the digital marketplace. This overlap of obsolescence and emerging new technologies is central to the archivist's work.

The primary dilemma for archivists worldwide is, Can you simultaneously preserve unique program content on this fugitive media *and* provide access to it? Paper can be photocopied or scanned fairly cheaply and quickly, but transferring one hour of a two-inch videotape (at the few labs who still handle this format) to a new master costs \$350 or more and can take weeks, depending on program length and tape condition. New masters can be put onto BetaSP, DigiBeta, or digital files. Because digital files of programs must be maintained, refreshed, and migrated to new systems, merely putting a TV program into a digital format is not “preservation” in itself. New technologies are changing this concept on an almost daily basis. Access copies of old programs are generally made to DVD or VHS. Many archives are exploring the use of streaming files for easy access. Some archives

make in-house transfers from three-quarter inch U-Matic or film to VHS or DVD, but professional lab preservation transfers are frequently preferred for those aging and often-problematic originals, so a reliable budget and/or substantial grants are crucial to continuing preservation and access.

Commercial interests and rights holders drive what is to be released on DVD. Television studios and other rights holders realized some time ago that old TV shows were “assets,” and now DVDs of entire multiyear series are appearing in boxed sets, cashing in on generational nostalgia for such programs as *Leave It to Beaver*, *That Girl*, or *Hill Street Blues*. Television shows previously released on VHS may suffer a fate similar to what the archivist Jan-Christopher Horak describes for theatrical films: that new production costs, rights, and profitability concerns may keep programs once out on VHS from being re-released on DVD.³ Since academic funding for research travel to archives is often limited, scholars may turn to studying these commercial copies. Yet if scholars write only about the programs that are available on DVD or currently being broadcast, then they miss out on most of television’s history. For those studying television’s women on screen and behind the scenes, no matter how convenient it is to download *Desperate Housewives* to an iPod, if they also want to study *Hi Mom*, a show Shari Lewis created and starred in for 1957’s housewives and children, at this point, it will have to be seen in an archive. As more television is being preserved than ever before and DVD releases expand consumers’ options, there are still hundreds of lesser-known series, unpopular or only regionally seen specials, forgotten pilots, and outtakes that archivists are working against time and budgets to preserve that may never make it outside the archives. A small selection of these drawn just from the University of Georgia’s Media Archives & Peabody Awards Collection and UCLA’s Film & Television Archives include:

- A compilation reel from the five-hour WTTG-TV “Junior Village Telethon” benefiting a Washington, D.C., orphanage organized by Robert and Ethel Kennedy, which aired February 17, 1968. Jack Paar hosts. Carol Channing and Robert Morse dance the bugaloo to Skitch Henderson’s band. Former barber Perry Como cuts Robert Kennedy’s hair for a \$500 pledge from Kennedy’s mother, Rose.
- A 1957 episode of Garry Moore’s *I’ve Got a Secret* with Philo T. Farnsworth and Buster Keaton as guests on the same show.
- A segment from Irv Kupcinet’s *At Random* on the 1960 Chicago Republican National Convention featuring an unscripted discussion among Walter Cronkite, Edward R. Murrow, Walter Winchell, Erwin Canham, Jack Bell, and Drew Pearson.
- Unique raw news footage from WALB-TV (Albany, Georgia) of the 1961–62 Albany Movement for civil rights in which Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy were involved.

Imagine how many more unseen programs exist in all archives holding television programs, and how many of them remain unstudied. Preservation of the

thousands of obscure, non-prime-time, or local shows is vitally important in studying the full history of television. And in order for archives to succeed in their missions, they need the patronage and support of scholars. The number of annual research inquiries and visits can drive or enhance existing archival budgets. Scholars' interest in and demand for rare materials can spur partnerships (and justifications) for funding grants.

In light of the progress and ongoing challenges in TV preservation since the Library of Congress report, how can the scholar work with archivists to accomplish their respective goals? One step forward in preservation came in 2004 with the National Television and Video Preservation Foundation (www.ntvpf.tv). This independent, nonprofit organization raises private funds and in-kind laboratory grants to preserve unique television and video materials throughout the United States. The foundation awarded 40 preservation grants in 2004–2005. Scholars can work with archives to suggest future grant and study projects, and write letters of support for projects under consideration for the current grants round.

As the population ages, more television material comes out of attics, garages, storage units, and closets. Where these materials have been stored and where they end up alters their life span and potential for current viewing and future digitization. Scholars can aid in long-term preservation of any such material they locate by seeing that it is directed to an appropriate archive.

Archivists' prime challenges today are funding, managing storage (both physical and digital storage conditions, space needs, and their related costs), and format migration. Budget and staff cuts at libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies mean that preservation priorities are shifting. Donations and grants fund many access projects. As a scholar, be prepared to compromise in working with an institution for access to older TV material. In the end, a collaboration between scholars and archivists can have long-term benefits for television history.

The scope of materials being saved is significant, not only in terms of format (two inch, one inch, three-quarter inch, one-half inch tape, and 16 mm film; many film archives also take in paper materials) but also in terms of content. Cable programs, talk shows, soap operas, newscast, and local promotions are all part of America's broadcasting heritage. Archivists generally do not suffer from the "bad object" syndrome that the TV scholar Michele Hilmes describes in academia.⁴ We want to save as much television material as we can, whether "low" culture (cable access) or "high" culture (PBS, Bravo), public service spot or prime-time sitcom. But the explosion in the number of broadcast channels means a corresponding amount of programming to save. Archivists with both early and current broadcasts must maintain obsolete formats and equipment, as well as be versed in digital conversion, file migration, and data storage. No matter how many TV programs come to the archives "born-digital," the need to transfer analog material to digital formats will never end.

As Karan Sheldon describes elsewhere in this “In Focus,” there are more small and regional archives, libraries, and historical societies finding and saving locally produced programming because it is a part of the local heritage and has meaning in situ, along with valuable local insight and historical context. Scholars will need to be prepared to explore archives in more places to get the full perspective on television’s history and cultural impact. They will need to think broadly during their research and look into these alternative holdings of local newsfilm or individual donor materials (such as kinescopes collected by show producers) that exist in Georgia, Maine, Nebraska, or Wisconsin. Everything they ought to see will not necessarily be found in New York, Los Angeles, or Washington, D.C.

Though not all archives have their holdings fully catalogued to item level, most have finding aids online, and nearly all of them will have a Web site with contact information, viewing facility descriptions, licensing fees, and basic guides to their holdings. Pick up the telephone and call an archivist; by having a conversation with the keepers of your field’s original historic material, you will get access to more material and information than you might anticipate.

Humanity can preserve television using old and new technologies. In both scholarship and preservation, looking back can inform us about our future. Archivists want the programs they preserve and the scholarship about them to reflect the breadth and depth of what Professor Houghland could only imagine in 1935.

Notes

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1. William Boddy, “The Place of Television Studies,” *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (2005): 81.
2. The report is available at <http://www.loc.gov/film/tv.html>.
3. Jan-Christopher Horak, “Editor’s Introduction,” *The Moving Image* 6 (Spring 2006): viii.
4. Michele Hilmes, “The Bad Object: Television in the American Academy,” *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (2005): 113.

Resources:

Association of Moving Image Archivists and the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences. *Local Television: A Guide to Saving Our Heritage*. 2004. Available through www.aminet.org.

Davidson, Steve, and Gregory Lukow, eds. *The Administration of Television Newsfilm and Videotape Collections: A Curatorial Manual* (Los Angeles: American Film Institute; Miami: Louis Wolfson II Media History Center, 1997).

Murphy, William T. *Television and Video Preservation 1997: A Report on the Current State of American Television and Video Preservation: Report of the Librarian of Congress* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1997).