

"The Scholar's Stake in Television Preservation"

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this morning about a subject--television preservation--which is crucial to the work of scholars and educators across many fields and academic institutions. My words today will, I hope, build upon previous testimony from educators in Los Angeles, including Janet Bergstrom, who spoke as a representative from the Society for Cinema Studies, an organization I have been actively involved with for over a decade. I would also like to acknowledge the Library of Congress's earlier work on film preservation, including the hearings which produced the 1994 report, "Redefining Film Preservation: A National Plan." I defer to the expertise of others who will speak before you on technical matters of physical preservation and legal practice; what I wish to add is simply the voice from a community of scholars and educators whose work would be immeasurably impoverished without access to the national heritage of television and video material. While occasionally arcane and technical-sounding, the work of television and video preservation, I believe, serves to support nothing less than the fundamental need of citizens in a democracy to understand their collective past and to actively shape their own cultural and political futures. I would like to address the four central issues of storage, access, public-private partnership, and funding from the point of view of someone who earns a living teaching and writing about the history of American television.

To briefly introduce myself, my work in television history began with a doctoral dissertation at New York University which ended up as a book at the University of Illinois Press entitled *Fifties Television*. I have since contributed two dozen articles on U.S. broadcast history to scholarly journals and monographs in this country and abroad. The subjects have ranged from the television broadcasting efforts by CBS and others in the early 1930s, to the postwar programming strategies of CBS and NBC, the quiz show scandals, the TV-violence campaigns of the early 1960s, the rise and fall of the classic TV Western, the contested role of American television programming on the U.S. image abroad, and the history of independent video in the United States. I am currently writing a book on the social history of electronic media for Oxford University Press, as well as a book on the *Twilight Zone* for the British Film Institute's Television Classics Series.

Before turning to larger questions of what we ought to be preserving, allow me to direct some specific remarks to the issues of storage, access, public-private partnership, and funding raised in the Library of Congress's report on film preservation. While it seems to me that these can, in large measure, be addressed in similar terms to those involved in film preservation, there are a number of novel aspects to the world of television preservation. Concerning storage, for example, the Library can make an important contribution by supporting the research and dissemination of optimal methods for the preservation of original materials and the conversion of original materials to new storage media. It might be noted that the term "television preservation" involves original materials ranging from 35mm and 16mm film stocks as well as a plethora of technologically-obsolete and endangered electronic recording systems. Unlike theatrical filmmaking, where film formats and viewing technologies have been remarkably stable historically, television demands the preservation of the rapidly-changing hardware systems as well as the program material. It seems to me that the Library of Congress can lead in the sharing of expertise concerning these historically-fragile technological platforms in order to ensure continued access to the material they support. Likewise, the Library can help pool technical expertise in the conversion of this technologically-endangered television material to more permanent and accessible electronic formats, with the recognition that any new formats are themselves likely to prove historically transient. Finally, as in film preservation, it seems prudent to pursue both the conservation of original materials and the conversion to new electronic storage systems.

The problem of access to television and video materials presents similar continuities and exceptions to the model of film preservation. There are similar goals in ensuring the widest possible access for scholars and educators to television collections, in simplifying procedures for copyright clearances and for resolving fair-use questions, in enabling remote access to information about the holdings of private and public archives, and in moving to direct electronic access to non-copyrighted television and video materials. These issues of access are likely to be more complex and vexing than the challenges of physical preservation and storage, and copyright-holders need to be protected from unauthorized commercial exploitation of their work, a concern more urgent with

the prospect of a commercial Internet trafficking in full-motion video and sound. However, the most deeply-felt point I would make this morning is the need to preserve the distinction between educational and commercial uses of television and video archive material, and with it the practice of fair use of copyrighted material by scholars and educators, whether for research, classroom instruction, presentations at professional conferences, or scholarly publication. The Library of Congress could encourage archives to devise donor agreements to ensure this fundamental distinction in order to ensure access by scholars to copyrighted material deposit. Issues of copyright may be more complex in television than in film in that, unlike the model of studio feature film production, networks and station operators rarely owned copyright for the works they broadcast. Outside of news and sport programs, copyright is more often held by individual production companies operating in an unstable business marked by rapid turnover of firms.

Regarding the final issues of public-private partnerships and the funding of television preservation, copyright owners must share the major responsibility for ensuring the physical preservation of, and scholarly access to, their television and video material. However, the Library of Congress can support these efforts by sharing information about the storage and transfer of primary materials and by encouraging and coordinating remotely-accessible databases of archive holdings. Public efforts should also be extended to support the preservation of vulnerable television and video material which is either outside of copyright or which lacks immediate commercial prospects for its copyright holder. A public-private partnership, in the form of a federally-chartered foundation, should also support efforts to preserve the diverse voices of artists and independent videomakers whose television work may exist in endangered video formats and equally-endangered nonprofit institutions.

If I may conclude by speaking, not of a Ten Most Wanted list of disappeared programs, but more generally about the special challenges of television and video preservation in deciding upon what is worthy of preservation. It is clear that television archives confront a fundamental challenge in their collective task; unlike the preservation of a collection of unique, one-off theatrical films, the basic definition of a television artifact can be confounding. In the commercial medium which

thrives on various forms of seriality, ought one to collect series pilots, "representative" episodes, or entire seasons or multi-year runs? Even compared to the thousands of American feature films of the Hollywood era, the universe of television material potentially available for archiving is staggering, even more so in view of the ongoing proliferation of outlets via direct broadcast satellite, cable and broadcasting. Despite this multiplication of program sources, many of them recycling material from previous seasons, meaningful scholarly access to television's past cannot be ensured to commercial syndication and to advertising-supported cable, no matter how single-mindedly devoted to various forms of nostalgia they might be. There are a host of contingencies which determine the entrance and survival of any specific network program in the syndication market, ranging from the original program's genre and number of episodes to the commercial and ideological needs of the current commercial programmer and broadcast advertiser. Television lacks film's cultural memory banks of the repertory cinema and the video shop, and an understanding of television's role in our nation's twentieth century is impossible without scholarly access to a much wider universe of material than those of interest to the demographically-minded programmers at Nick at Night or the Family Channel.

Given this situation, let me offer an historian's plea for the preservation of the widest range of television material. Invaluable public institutions like the Museum of Television and Radio have taken on the dual tasks of both celebrating that which it judges of highest quality in the medium and of assembling a collection which will illuminate television's role as cultural and political agenda setter and battleground. However, historians need access not only to the prestigious prime-time network hits, but also to less celebrated television material from low-prestige genres, affiliate fringe time, independent and community stations, and from the chaotic world of small format video and public access cable.

My own scholarly interests have been directed at understanding the role of TV programming in wider cultural, intellectual and political contexts, including the shifting definitions of citizenship and the public sphere; the relationship of American intellectuals to mass culture; the policy debates regarding broadcast regulation, the effects of television violence, and the

international role of American commercial television. Addressing these sorts of questions of historical context in a meaningful way is not likely to be accomplished by looking at a few critically privileged programs; instead, to understand how commercial television became entangled such larger cultural and political issues requires a broad consideration of as many relevant programs as possible, a consideration only possible only with the resources of public and private television archives. Much of the most productive recent historical work in film and television studies has indeed focused on the culturally marginal and excluded, guided by the proposition that what a society pushes to the margins of cultural expression can say a great deal about what is central to its beliefs and practices. Television preservation must make available to future researchers and scholars the full range of what can be found on our nation's screens. Likewise, future historians considering some of today's loudest public and political controversies associated with television, like the debates over the effects of negative political advertising or the cultural consequences of so-called trash TV, will depend on their access to the often culturally-denigrated programs which provoked the controversies. My point is simply that contemporary critical taste cannot offer assurance about what future historians will find revealing about our contemporary culture, and absent such assurances the prudent course seems to be to try to preserve the diversity of our television environment.

The challenges of preservation and access to the uncountable hours of our television past and present, a medium at once of great cultural and political power and an almost willful ephemerality, are indeed daunting. While my life in the classroom exposes me to students with what seem to be increasingly short cultural memories, there is also a genuine hunger among students and the public for non-nostalgic confrontations with our cultural history. As television increasingly becomes *the* medium for historical representation and popular memory, it is vital that its own place in history be available for scrutiny and contestation. The often unglamorous work of television preservation is the necessary ground for such democratic interrogation and we neglect it at our peril.