
**Television Archives and Educational Use:
Access Issues in the Age of Cable and Endless Syndication**

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Two anecdotes may help explain my concern with the current state of video/television program preservation. A few years back I was transferring and editing a program master of mine produced in the 1970s. As the tape played in the on-line suite what was at first mere drop-out morphed into a diagonal band of video noise that slowly crawled to the top of, and soon engulfed, the screen. The tape destructed, its iron oxide sluffed off, and the operator hit abort even as that part of my history enacted the law of entropy in fast-forward. The sickening realization that my original had vanished before my eyes only got worse as the operator warned me that "substandard" tape and sluffing oxide may damage their costly video heads in ways that I would regret. A few years later, while teaching television history at the graduate level, a "classic" television program from my personal collection seemed to start sliding out of frame. Tape tension problems pulled the tape out of alignment even as the hi-speed rotary heads shaved-off important sync information at the edge. Stretched and routed, that scene has now also vanished into the phosphorescence. In one case, aging tape damaged equipment even as it self-destructed; in the other, a poorly maintained VCR in the educational arena insured that I could never teach with that irreplaceable clip again.

Because I wear several professional hats--I teach television history to graduate students and video production to undergraduates, and am an independent producer--I accept the kind of hopeless impermanence, and entropy described above as part of the unfortunate parameters of the field. As an educator, however, I think there are many things that we can do to improve the situation, and to insure that perhaps the single most important defining artifact of our age--television--is preserved and made accessible for research and instruction on a wide basis.

For years I bemoaned the fact that important historical programs were only available to those fortunate enough to be "on-site" at television archives. Everyone else teaching television history in the country (and there now are many) must be scrambling with unrepresentative or skewed samples, to bolster courses that depended more on contextual or background information than they did on the single most important piece of historical "evidence"--the television program itself. If one looks at the ways that many histories of the medium were written one finds evidence of this strategic lack: historical accounts focused on regulatory precedents, industrial practices, and legal milestones; or aesthetic histories were driven by

biographical anecdotes, personal memory, and critical hierarchies. History is not obviously one single thing to be referred to, but unfortunately, of the many discourses that up make television history--the program artifact itself is frequently written out of the equation. The program is perhaps the most important piece of evidence to consider, and even communications scholars that focus on effects do bad science when they leap from producer to audience without exhaustively understanding complexities of the program artifact itself. But whose to blame them? Program videotapes have not been available to them in a ways that science demands: programs cannot be used in systematic, controlled, repeatable, and verifiable ways across the discipline. The kinds of histories and science that we get, then, is also a logical outgrowth of the archival straightjacket and the meager samples that we have been forced to work with.

But this is changing. For example, early impressionistic histories falsely totalized the early 1950s as a "golden age" of live anthology dramas. More recent scholars like Christopher Anderson, with access to studio archives have demonstrated quite the opposite--that Hollywood telefilm played a tremendous role in television from the very start. Other historians have dramatized the need to utilize exhaustive archival research in the way histories are written: Lynn Spigel by tying archival programs to the formation of the post-war home and consumerism; the late Nina Liebman, by exhaustively mapping domestic ideology through hundreds of archival programs. While these stand as precedents for how television "research" might be done, they also raise thorny issues for the non-research part of the academic equation: teaching and pedagogy. If a teacher does not have access to the Warner Bros. studio archive or to the UCLA Film and Television Archive in the classroom, he or she is left with an outdated and ahistorical notion of pedagogy.

Industrial and Technological changes may, however, be altering the picture. This past week, in a television studies seminar, several of my students utilized clips from the "complete" episodes of the Bionic Women and the 6 Million Dollar Man to understand the cultural context of television in the 1970s. They could do this because both series are now in sequential, nightly syndication on the Sci-Fi Channel. For various reasons, even the established archives do not come close to having this kind of complete collection; nor could they ever make it available to every cable subscriber in the country. Cable's Nick-at-Nite, of course, established this precedent with its network celebration of "classic television." Viacom's niche in the multi-channel universe, then, promised to do what non-profit archives could never do: make enormous hours of historical programming available to one and all, and this resource has in fact been useful in accessing historical program texts--60s and 70s sitcoms in particular.

But the commercial 500 channel universe cannot, in any useful sense, take over the historic role of the archive and museum. Bewitched or Dragnet on Nick-at-Nite are not the same as Bewitched and Dragnet on the nights that they originally aired; are not in fact the same as the Bewitched and Dragnet episodes

locked in the archival vaults. Cable works-over these artifacts in marked ways--they are visually "branded" with network IDs throughout the episodes, they break differently, are set-up and introduced differently, and have different ads inserted in the breaks. If one important goal of television history is to consider the logic of ads and their relationship to programs, then any kind of original context here has evaporated. All these factors work to remake and stylistically transform older programs into a kind of de-historified, postmodern, retro-programming "soup" in the 1990s. These are not, then, the artifacts I referred to earlier that have been "written-out" of the histories of the 1960s; but are hybrids that will permutate forever in the "ancillary afterlife" of "endless" 500 channel syndication. They are certainly less useful for understanding the 1960s than they are the 1990s.

I am, therefore, still concerned about the ultimate impact that will come with the new technologies and delivery systems. The "niche mythos" of the 500 channel world promises that every piece of historical programming will have some future life (read: economic value) in the multi-channel future. CBS's strong arming of the Vanderbilt University Archives for advertising its television collection on the internet in 1993 shows that the endless ancillary afterlife actually works against legitimate educational access. Whereas news and public affairs were once considered "non-commercial" venues produced in the public interest, they have now been "re-commercialized" given the many possible emerging markets that have opened up for the networks as a result of new electronic delivery technologies. It is not certain, then, that the commercial imperative that drives this world will also solve the legitimate non-commercial needs of educators for access, research and teaching. For example, rather than resisting "appropriations" and piracy by fans of the X-Files, Fox has aggressively entered the internet to provide web-site materials--both textual and visual--that appear to meet (and infact fuel) the needs of their viewers/customers. Photographic production stills from the series available here are infinitely more accessible than those available from the studio via traditional hard-copy marketing channels; telephone or written requests.

But Los Angeles is still, after all, a city and industry governed by the commercial imperative; a culture where all forms of knowledge are proprietary. In an industry where everything can and will be "licenced," the concept of "fair-use" might as well come from outer-space. As an academic, rather than complain about being cut-out of the action by the industry (as I might have done earlier in my career), I am interested in considering "win-win" propositions, whereby the industry comes to consider academic insights as valuable contributions to the future of the field. In many ways the industry has already begun to place a premium on the kinds of knowledge that academia produces: Roseanne does a knowing, retro-critique of 1950s sitcoms and regressive gender norms that easily stands in for a television history 101 lecture; Nickelodean does an interdisciplinary cultural analysis of the Ken Burnsian documentary aesthetic on PBS. The audience at home laughs but the programs and screenplays themselves utilize social and psychological insights that came from academic histories and cultural studies in the first place. In

the brutally competitive multi-channel world, then, historical insights and academic models are now used regularly for economic gain and programming leverage by producers and writers. A generation of practitioners are now entering the industry having seriously studied television and film history in the university. This convergence of interests--in world that once completely segregated the dominant industry on the inside and the critical academy on the outside--makes possible a kind of common ground where both industry and academia can work.

Good television histories, enabled by archival access and preservation, are also, then, very much in the interests of the industry. The cache of knowledge that such works provide is an important public resource in an electronic world that looks more and more like a volatile updating of the Oklahoma land rush. Unless we bolster and reaffirm the doctrine of "fair-use" the faint pleas of historians and cultural studies scholars will simply vanish in the same ancillary afterlife that has commercialized television.

Once again, however, educators need to be pragmatic about the legitimate needs of the parties involved in archival access. How can we protect the needs of producers who need to prevent piracy, for example, even as archives and museums *should* begin to initiate travelling exhibitions and educational series on television history for broader populations? One answer to the archive access/teaching imperative may lie in the availability of the CD-Rom as a distribution/study format. There are economies of scale that make the format affordable, there are CD-Rom mastering machines now within the economic and acquisitions reach of archives, museums and universities, and the "hardened" form of the CD makes possible not just a different kind of preservation, but the kind of quality control and uniformity sorely needed by researchers; traits now absent in any of the current tape-based systems.

Deposit agreements and negotiations with archive donors should also stress the safeguards that come with the system and with limited educational distribution. First, unlike videotape the CD-Rom is typically pc-based and not easily pirated; second, the format does not make "recording" a wide-scale option for consumers/viewers; and finally, to insure both identification and severely limited use, a standard time-code/source window can be inserted lower-thirds frame to protect and limit the use of the television program on the CD. While it pains me to make this latter suggestion--given my interest in stylistic and visual analysis--this feature would have several chief benefits: (1) communications scholars and television historians would have access to the same episodes on a repeatable and verifiable basis; (2) each video frame would be assigned a visual time-code number for accurate and universal reference; (3) the archive source would also be keyed in to eliminate any confusion about origins; and (4) the illicit commercial potential of a program circulating in this form would vanish given this overt, visual, on-screen identification of time-frame and institutional source. It is difficult to imagine

anything in this form being broadcast or cable-cast given its altered on-screen form, but a format of this sort would be a true resource for educators.

Unless we as a culture begin to take television as seriously as our moral condemnations typically make of it; unless we take proactive measures to engage the issues of fair-use and distribution in the educational context; we will simply let the electronic land-rush configure culture and knowledge for us. While "privatizing" may be a tantalizing prospect for those with financial resources, it will not be the same for those without resources. After years of teaching undergraduate television production students--in the chronically underfunded world of affordable, public, higher education--it is clearer to me than ever before that this kind of education has a unique function. We can, if we choose to bolster public media education in the ways outlined above, continue to enable the people of California to engage the new electronic media; and to engage it with terms that will help these future practitioners make the media responsive to the people, not vice-versa.

Of course, the modest proposals I've made above cost money, and it always hurts to talk about money. But these resources can come if one considers the kind of technological and economic logic I've sketched out above; and if one initiates and continues formal dialogue between the industry, the archives, and the academy. Certainly, "facilitating" this kind of dialogue should and could be a public service function of government and the Library of Congress. The key, once again--in seeking common ground, in developing win-win scenarios, and in developing technical safeguards for access/distribution--rests in considering how the vigorous, scholarly study of television also benefits the industry and the American people. Archival-based historical research of television, then, is also very much in the industry's self-interest. It can provide a kind of intellectual capital that the industry can take to the bank--in the form of future screenplays and programming. An educated work force--familiar with the rich and complex histories of the medium because of archival preservation and educational access--should be the common ground of the industry, the academy, and the archives.

