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The Current State of American Television and Video Preservation
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I appear before this panel representing a variety of professional experiences with television and video over the past twelve years. My area of graduate study at the University of Wisconsin was media and society, which was the focus of both my dissertation research and my graduate teaching assignments. While living in Madison, I also produced a series of television documentaries on state politics for Wisconsin Public Television, drawing upon extensive archival news footage from the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. After completing my degree in 1990, I joined the faculty in the Department of Telecommunications at Indiana University where I recently was awarded tenure and promotion based on my historical scholarship regarding electronic media.

Therefore, although I share many interests and concerns with my distinguished colleagues on this panel, I imagine I have the freshest recollection of the challenges confronting graduate students and junior faculty, many of whom conduct what we sometimes refer to as credit card research. In an era of diminishing educational resources, Mastercard and Visa often finance the fieldwork of young scholars as we travel to distant archives, sustain ourselves on fast food, and stay at low rent hotels or, if we're lucky, sleep on the couches of friends and family. I mention this because our research is so terribly dependent on low-cost access to materials that are either extremely expensive to obtain through commercial venues or are available only in limited quantities at a small number of locations. In an era when the cataloging, preservation, and circulation of historical video materials is growing ever more technologically feasible, we nevertheless confront legal, economic, and institutional obstacles that are distinctive to television research. By comparison, when a newspaper covers an event, that account is almost

immediately available for scholarly critique and will remain so for years to come in microfilm and archive collections. The same is true with magazine articles, novels, and popular songs. Yet our access to television programs from both the recent and distant past is so haphazard that scholars regularly confront the problem of writing about programs they have never seen.

To further emphasize the contrast between television and other media, allow me to offer some hypothetical examples of the obstacles scholars confront. Imagine not being able to examine the text of President Kennedy's address to the nation at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis because the only copy of the complete speech is now owned by the New York Times archives, which charges access and service fees for that single document that exceed the entire annual research budget of most university faculty in the humanities. Or imagine the Saint Louis Post-Dispatch refusing to make past editions of the paper widely available on microfilm, requiring researchers to travel to Missouri, if they want to read letters to the editor regarding the Vietnam War. An historian's attempt to gather information on public attitudes from different sections of the country would no doubt be severely hindered if not made impossible by such a constraint. Or imagine conducting research on domestic labor in the 1950s and not being given access to newspaper advertisements for appliances because library microfilm services were not allowed to carry such commercial forms of media without securing clearances from each individual advertiser.

These scenarios seem ridiculous for one reason or another and most of the people in this room would no doubt be concerned if such materials were not reasonably available to researchers. Yet I would suggest that in an era when the television is the preeminent mode of popular communication, much of what the medium circulates is unavailable for legitimate scholarly scrutiny. It is as if we have blanked out an important part of our cultural heritage because commercial interests and copyright concerns ^{have} ~~had~~ overridden public interest and free scholarly inquiry. Before identifying some of the specific problems I have confronted and before offering some perhaps naive suggestions regarding ways to resolve this dilemma, let me turn first to explaining some of the reasons why scholars want to improve their access to this vast domain of popular imagery.

Allow me to begin by pointing to a book I recently published, entitled Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics. This volume examines one of the most ambitious public education efforts in American history when the three major networks rapidly expanded their news operations and elevated the documentary genre to a central role in primetime programming. Promoted by government leaders, funded by broadcasters, and hailed by critics, these programs were part of a Cold War education project: an attempt to reconnect the middle-class citizen with the responsibilities of public life in the so called Free World.

Although I had to travel widely about the country as part of my research effort, I was lucky enough to locate many of these documentaries because they were part of an explicit public service effort by the networks and therefore were widely distributed to schools, libraries, and museums after their broadcast run in the early 1960s. I was also fortunate because these programs have no apparent commercial value. They are no longer newsworthy and have little entertainment value and therefore are largely of interest to scholars, preservationists, and a small group of educational users. I was also lucky because I undertook my research just before many film collections around the country started disposing of their prints of these television programs.

What was I looking for in my research? I wanted to understand how television operated as a site of contest where various groups worked to fashion a vision of the Cold War that connected to their particular political, institutional, and social agendas. I also wanted to understand how television mediated between the realms of public life and private domestic experience. Much of my research effort was expended on manuscript archives, government document collections, and contemporary newspaper accounts of the era. Yet if I had not been able to view the actual programs themselves, I would have missed much of the complexity, subtlety, and contradiction embedded in these television programs. I would have made erroneous assumptions about their meanings and I would not have asked questions that later became important components of my argument, such as, "How were gender roles treated in the public service programming of this era?" and "Why did African American viewers show little interest in these programs despite the fact that race was the second most common theme of these documentaries?" Without access to a

broad range of programs, I might have written a very different book.

Such scholarly interest in the connections between popular culture and larger societal forces is not peculiar to the field of media studies, however. Just as the 19th century novel is commonly analyzed in relation to its particular historical context, so has television programming grown to be a legitimate object for scholarly analysis in a wide range of disciplines. I am currently director of the Cultural Studies Program at Indiana University, an interdisciplinary program that draws on the collaborative efforts of sixty faculty from nineteen departments and programs across the university. It is representative of one of the most rapidly growing intellectual movements in the humanities today with scholars exploring the societal implications of everything from political cartoons to children's toys to popular music. Perhaps most prominent of all is the study to television, the medium that more than 80% of Americans have shared for forty years across boundaries of race, gender, generation, and socio-economic status. To talk about politics, business, domestic life--to talk about these and many other issues in the latter half of this century--without making reference to television is to delude oneself with the notion that television doesn't really matter because it's just cheap entertainment. On the contrary, a growing number of prominent scholars would now suggest that inscribed in these texts are the aspirations, fantasies, and power relations of this society. They are as much a part of our social and cultural heritage as the billions of printed pages archived in research libraries across the country.

Just as television affords a distinctive entry point for a range of scholarly studies, so does it offer classroom instructors a vehicle for addressing a wide range of social issues and teaching a variety of important critical thinking skills. The connections between television texts and society can be the springboard for active learning exercises in the classroom. And the ways we measure of our success in these exercises is not far different from the ways scholars have for a long time measured their success when using epic poems or realist novels in the classroom. Allow me to point to a recent comment made by a student on a course evaluation form in one of my upper-level undergraduate classes: "Professor Curtin teaches not only about telecomm, but is incredible about tying in history, social issues, policies, etc. I've learned more about those

things in the two classes I've had with him than in any other class." Thus students can learn to use television critically and can be taught to understand important connections between culture and society. What concerns me as a media scholar is that the present situation not only limits my access to important research materials, but it puts me in a situation that might be comparable to teaching about 19th century America without having access to the novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the editorials of Horace Greeley, or the speeches of Frederick Douglas.

My remarks so far have focused on the importance of preservation, but allow me to briefly identify some of the key problems confronting preservationists. Here I will restrict my comments to news and information programming since that is where much of my work has been done up to this point in my career.

First of all we need to consider the question of access to commercial video collections. When I began researching television documentaries as a graduate student in 1988, I noticed that the holdings of various public museums and archives were somewhat limited and so I contacted the news archives of the three major networks. In an era of corporate downsizing, each of these repositories has been under intense pressure to trim costs and to focus on revenue-generating services. The response I received from Sherman Grinberg, which then handled the ABC News collection, was representative of how each of the networks dealt with my inquiry. "I don't think we are the people for you," wrote one staffer. "People come to us for bits and pieces of footage. Us and others like us. Once they make their selection, pay us, off they go. I am sorry we can't be of more help." Enclosed with the note was a catalog of Grinberg's services and a rate card that started at \$25 per hour just to search their collection. To a graduate student then earning \$9000 per year who was the recipient of a "lavish" \$1500 research grant, the access charges were obviously prohibitive.

Yet, to my mind, another issue was raised by this response and that is: What are the implications of archiving "bits and pieces of footage" as opposed to entire programs or raw field footage? What concerns me is that the priorities of the commercial services are very different than those of a preservationist, a researcher, or a teacher. Whereas the network archives might be content with video snippets of say the "kitchen

debate" between Nixon and Khrushchev, the scholar might be interested in more extensive holdings. Under pressure to trim costs, it worries me that a commercial archive might save the video snippets versus the more useful but longer program or raw footage.

A similar phenomena occurs at the local level where news operations regularly pull short video clips for end-of-the-year retrospective programs, while committing much of the rest to the recycling bin. Indeed, the problem is now exacerbated by video news gathering technology in which the tapes can be reused time and again. When I produced a series of historical documentaries on Wisconsin politics in 1989, it was readily apparent that the amount of available historical footage dropped dramatically after local television stations switched from film to video field recording equipment in the late 1970s. Although previously the stations donated old newsfilm footage to local collectors and to the state archives, video footage is now simply erased and reused. Rare visual documents of state politics and social life were simply deleted in order to save a modest amount of money on the cost of video stock. As I completed my documentary projects, I found myself constantly trying to paste over or write around gaps in the visual record of the state's history.

Finally, I should point to the fact that what exists in public archival collections is often the product of charity on the part of producers or television executives rather than the outcome of a systematic effort to collect significant artifacts. Moreover, the collections that exist are sometimes unprocessed or haphazardly cataloged. I vividly remember combing through the card files of the Library of Congress for an entire day, trying to make sure that I had not overlooked documentaries that were not listed with other installments of the same series. And I recall being barred from important collections during my first trip to UCLA because materials I found in the catalog had not yet been processed. Indeed, documentarists and researchers who are, under special circumstances, allowed access to unprocessed collections, sometimes turn over a copy of their notes to archivists who lack the funding and staff resources to properly organize their video collections.

In closing, let me offer some suggestions that are perhaps naive, but may prove nevertheless useful. I begin with the assumption that more,

much more, money and staff time need to be devoted to television and video preservation for all the reasons outline above. But what should be the priorities for preservation efforts in the future?

- The Library of Congress (LOC) should advocate legislation to exempt it from copyright laws for off-air recording or duplication of video materials intended specifically for research and preservation.

Once granted such an exemption:

- The LOC should enter into cooperative arrangements with commercial archives to duplicate and store materials that are deemed historically significant but are not currently available through existing public archives or market sources. The LOC should also set up a mechanism whereby researchers could request it to obtain specific materials that are only available through expensive commercial distribution networks.
- The LOC should assign a staff member to regularly gather video recordings of television events that disrupt the regular programming schedule. O.J. Simpson's flight and trial provide obvious recent examples, but attention must also be paid to programming about the NAFTA controversy and the Beijing Spring of 1989. Such "media events" represent moments of collective national and international experience, and should be available for scholarly critique as soon as possible.

Paradoxically, the inverse is also true. The LOC needs to gather and catalog samples of the seemingly most ordinary and mundane forms of television programming: weather reports, cooking shows, exercise programs, infomercials, etc.

- The LOC should also place emphasis on the collection of local programming, which too often is overlooked due to the continuing dominance of network television.
- Finally, the LOC must continue to improve its cataloging of video and television texts. An effort should also be made to detail the holdings of commercial vendors. The LOC should also pay careful attention to the emerging possibilities offered by digital technology for storage, access, and indexing.

As I pointed out earlier, I am sure there are legal, institutional, and economic reasons why it would be difficult to pursue some of the objectives I outlined above. Yet as researchers and teachers we have at our disposal a very incomplete record of the programs broadcast nationwide over the past fifty years on our most ubiquitous medium of mass communication. Unlike bestseller novels that anyone can peruse at the local library or newspaper accounts that can be examined on microfilm, much of our television heritage is inaccessible or disappearing due to the pressures of the marketplace. Ironically, much of what is now inaccessible was originally broadcast over the public airwaves by corporations who are supposed to be acting as trustees of a precious national resource. I urge the Library of Congress to take decisive action to preserve this public record and make it more widely available to scholars and interested members of the public at large.