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Statement for

The Study of the Current State of American Television and Video Preservation
at the Library of Congress

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Dr. Billington and other members of the Study Board, my name is Douglas Gomery and I have been teaching media studies for more than 20 years. I earned a Ph. D. in 1975, have authored nine books, written some 300 articles and 1000 reviews, and served three years as a member of the Board of Trustees of the American Film Institute. In 1993-1994 I served on the "Public-Private Cooperation Task Force" as part of the consideration of film preservation.

I have been a full professor at the University of Maryland for almost a decade, but here I represent only myself. I am not making a special plea on behalf of any particular organization. I have attached a VITAE to the end of this statement.

I have two points.

First, I think the state of moving image preservation in the United States is in appalling shape, despite heroic efforts by the Library of Congress and many other archives. We are losing millions upon millions of hours of television and video -- the dominant mass medium of the later half of the 20th century.

This process of loss is not because of the lack of will on the behalf of a hard working group archivists. I have long observed and admired their considerable efforts. Let me now personally applaud their work. They have a difficult job, but do it with grace and skill under severe constraints.

Their problems -- to this observer -- lie with determining what should be done and finding the needed resources to do the job.

As to focus, we need to tell them that the scope of the preservation effort needs to be expanded.

We have a wonderful plan in "Refining Film Preservation: A National Plan," as issued by the Library of Congress in August 1994 and should follow its lead

Yet the scope of the effort needed for television and video is vast, almost overwhelming, when compared to film

We need a comprehensive national comprehensive moving image effort that realizes that unless we begin to save and catalog television today, or future historians will find the same amount of minimally preserved video as film scholars struggle to work with for the silent cinema.

Indeed we enter the next century with an altogether too small a record of our television age

I was planning to insert here several vivid examples of the worst cases of what has not been saved but even that is difficult to know because what is 'lost' is unknown as things do turn up and we have no master listing. As one who is fascinated by the coming of television, I hope that examples

of everything from Walter Cronkite on our local channel 9 in the early 1950s to Patsy Cline appearing on channel 7 every week in the mid-1950s will surface because some engineer and/or collector has it squirreled away in his or her basement.

Even the TV I was sure was there seems 'lost.' So, as I understand it, there is no complete copy of "Twelve Angry Men," a classic live drama from the 1950s; only a found a half hour of this celebrated hour long drama seems to have survived.

If the celebrated hours of television have not been saved, one can only imagine what has become of the 'routine' or 'ordinary.' So most local TV news, the record of our community life on tape, is lost. Recently I had the chance to interview Bob Dalton, long with the CBS affiliate here in the nation's capital, on the air since 1951. He has just retired and on his couch were a dozen video tapes of his career work. A dozen!

And only one, the opening of a new station facility in 1954, was dated before 1990. A distinguished career on the air throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s had simply disappeared.

Ironically we do have a few collections TV news footage from the 1950s and 1960s, because it was shot on film. In the days following stations converting to videotape in the 1970s, a score deposited their 'unneeded' film in archives from Mississippi to Florida to Wisconsin.

Thereafter news on tape has not been systematically preserved. It is too easy to tape over old news or discard heavily used tapes. I was touring a local station recently and saw a box on a desk in an engineer's office. I asked: "What are those tapes?" My former student's answer: "Oh, we are giving them away. Want one?"

These were a portion of the news programs from as recently as 1994!

We have too many examples of television stations recycling or destroying videotapes one

calendar year after they were recorded.

I do not wish to dwell on the missing.

Let me call for a beginning of systematically preserving all television news, from the network evening news to CNN's regular reports to local broadcasts across the country. We should not forget to save local morning, noon, evening, and nightly newscasts issued from over-the-air TV channels and increasingly delivered over cable TV wires.

Innovative forms should also demand our attention, from presidents and other persons of the day appearing on the "new news" ("Larry King Live" and "MTV Townhall," to state but two obvious examples) to the increasing number of lengthy documentaries cablecast on the Discovery and Learning Channels.

In journalism classes, just as we study great newspapers, magazines, and books of the past, we need to the same for TV news. But too much is already gone forever, from Edward R. Murrow at the national level to Walter Cronkite when he was a local newscaster here in Washington on WTOP-TV, channel 9.

We need stronger institutions for preservation. The valiant TV news archive at Vanderbilt University rests on shaky financial ground.

We can not expect TV operations to preserve and they do not.

Videotaped moving images -- from over-the-air television, cable television, and video cassettes -- are being produced in fantastic ever-growing numbers, and we need to begin saving and preserving them in a systematic way.

We need current inventories of what we have and a plan to copy as much as possible.

We need to recognize that videotape is less stable than safety

We need a national center for the collection of television news in all its forms.

We need to begin now.

Only then can we scholarly begin to systematically analyze the past and create a true body of knowledge of our age of television.

Thus I come to my second point -- addressing the lack of a regular source of funds to make preservation possible.

If we should save as much as we can, the "can" is defined by money.

Surely we all agree that at the moment there is not enough money for preservation. Private companies do not regularly invest; public institutions are starving in this era of budget cuts.

I have a specific proposal.

My logic proceeds in two steps. First the function of moving image preservation in the contemporary United States is properly understood as part of basic education. Educational leaders have long acknowledged the need for collections of books and other printed materials. In the 1990s moving images need to join this core library.

Second, the task of national moving image preservation is not a local nor a state concern. It covers the whole nation and thus the federal government ought to underwrite a program of national moving image preservation as part of the work of the Library of Congress.

To pay for this I propose a user tax. That is those of us who gain entertainment and information from moving images, insight and fun from television should be willing to contribute a tiny portion of what we spend on purchase and rental to maintain preservation. I suggest one percent (1%) tax on all gross sales, rentals, and advertising expenditures of all forms of television and video.

I think such a tax would annually yield -- in 1996 -- at least \$500 million dollars, and more

in future. That type of regular (and ever increasing) funding would go a long way making sure that education which requires moving images will always have access to needed primary materials.

To the average customer this means two cents more on a video tape rental; TV stations and networks would pay more, but thereafter be relieved of preservation expenses

No one wants to pay more taxes, but to do nothing simply guarantees our losses will continue and rob future generations of a true knowledge of what went on during the latter half of the 20th century.

Thank you.