



Remarks on the Current State of American Television and Video Preservation

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The NBC News Archives is responsible for preservation of News film and video tape, archival databases, film and tape libraries and warehouses worldwide for NBC News

NBC News has relied on its archives as a support mechanism for over fifty years. What began as a way of keeping a collection of major news events, became a way to present broadcasts in a cost efficient manner. If one show shot an image, a second show was not required to send a camera crew out to record it again if the archives could turn a clean, well preserved copy, quickly. Needless to say, our images are used every day, in every news show that airs on NBC. We also feel the great responsibility for keeping the recorded history of this country during the second half of the twentieth century.

Additional attention has been focused on the collection, heightened by the rise in the number of our outlets, including the NBC Superchannel and the Microsoft joint venture. Cable and the internet are just two growth areas that could produce an unlimited number of access points for the consumer. The problem is that there is not an equal amount of programming to go with it. Thus the archives provides NBC with enormous flexibility to produce high quality programs at a reasonable cost. But this new world is also fraught with peril for archives. I like to reserve those comment till the end.

The NBC News Archives is currently involved in a number of special projects to improve our collection. We have spent two years designing a powerful new database that will allow NBC personnel to perform sophisticated searches on the editorial content of the archives, via visual write-ups, transcripts, and keywords. They will be able to view or hear digitized portions of the collection and place electronic orders for the original material to our libraries and warehouses around the globe.

We are designing a new facility to allow better climate controlled storage for our film and tape as well as offering us the ability to separate duplicate copies of our broadcasts to prevent catastrophic loss.

For the past three years, we have been transferring our oldest tape formats. Our 2" tapes will be completely transferred to an analog and digital copy by the end of the year. Shortly, we will begin the enormous task of transferring our 3/4" cassettes. The reason



why these are the first on our list of preservation items are twofold. The 2" tapes, though generally of good quality, will no longer have the hardware to play back in a very short amount of time. While there is an abundance of 3/4" hardware, these tapes have shown the most dramatic decay of any portion of our collection. Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan are rapidly fading. This does not mean that the other tape formats are much better; all video tape will require transfer in the not too distant future. This will present an enormous crisis for the country and the world if we broaden the scope to all the consumer video tapes that are in everyone's possession.

The digital era may help all this and I certainly will be one of the first to cheer when we leave the video tape era. But there is also this peril. We are all feeling our way through the new mediums. In the process, the focus has been on producing not on preserving. What will happen to all those web sites? What will be cost effective to archive in the cable world? What will be compatible to what? There are many ideas as to what is digital and many hope that the computer and the television mold together into one great unified and standardized entity. But there is also the chance that the climate that produced the 2" and 3/4" video tape will repeat itself.

During that period, the old medium, film, was being replaced by the first video tape. But that 2" tape was expensive and most were recorded over as a cost savings. This is similar to current high quality digital disk. Then other formats developed, some better than others, some that failed rather quickly...just like what is happening now. Libraries became splintered as different groups control their own formats. Much was lost because production groups did not focus on preservation, much was lost when experimental formats were abandoned, much was lost because the hardware evolved. All the while, new information came pouring in in new ways and with ever greater volume. All these scenarios are occurring today and it is important that the library take a leadership role.

For you to set the standards for how best to preserve all tape formats and to keep a storehouse of the hardware as well as the cassettes. Beyond this, the Library must anticipate the results of this next revolution and try and assist in setting a guideline for retention of all that is being produced in non-traditional ways with multiple digital hardware and software formats, to work towards a unified digital format, and to determine how best to save all the 24 hour per day streams of information.

We will face this at NBC and more, and we look forward to working with the Library and others in our field and sharing our experience.

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