

NATIONAL FILM AND TELEVISION ARCHIVE
Curator: Clyde Jeavons



Celebrating 100 Years of Cinema

Bill Murphy
Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound Division
Library of Congress
Washington DC
USA

British Film Institute
21 Stephen Street
London W1P 2LN

Telephone 0171 255 1444
Telex: 27624 BFILDNG
Fax: 0171 436 7950
Direct Fax: 0171 580 7503

Registered Charity

31st October 1996

Dear Bill,

As requested, there follows a description of our system of acquiring British television output by off-air recording, including the costs.

The British Film Institute's National Film and Television Archive has been acquiring television programmes for preservation and access purposes since the late 1950's, though there exists no system of statutory deposit for this material. In the early years, there was also very little in the way of funding, so acquisition relied largely on the co-operation of the television industry and much of the material deposited was that for which the companies had no further use. Nevertheless, some very valuable collections were accrued, particularly when companies lost their broadcasting licences as can happen in the commercial television sector.

In 1969 the Independent Television (ITV) Network companies began to give annual grants to the BFI, so that the Archive could purchase broadcast standard copies of selected programmes from the originating companies. Between 1969 and 1984, this ensured the annual acquisition of several hundred programmes. To increase the level of acquisition, and to include the new Channel 4, which began in 1982, the BFI proposed a change to acquisition by off-air recording and negotiated an increased grant from ITV and a new one from Channel 4 to set this up.

In 1985 the Archive thus began to record selected output from these two channels off transmission (and thus to select it in advance). The recordings are made on both broadcast standard and viewing formats (initially 1" and VHS, now D3 and VHS). Recording off-air means that the record created is that of

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the programmes as they were seen by the public, including the commercial breaks and promotions as well as any technical problems on transmission. This can be very important when significant live news events are involved, as it frequently happens that the TV companies themselves do not record a complete version of their output.

The amount recorded has increased over the years, often in line with the increase in transmission hours. We currently record about 28% from ITV and 25% from Channel 4, enough to ensure the capture of all the most "important" material (News, Documentaries, Drama, Arts etc) and a representative selection of the rest (Entertainment, Sports, Talk Shows etc). We have detailed selection guidelines, written by our staff and approved by industry experts.

Our current grant monies total about £550,000 per annum from ITV and Channel 4. This is spent on tape stocks (approx 30%), recording staff (27.5%), video machinery and maintenance (15%), documentation (15%), and administration (12.5%). The BFI also contributes towards the operation from it's public funds. Some of the ITV money is used to purchase copies of regional material direct from the companies, as direct recording can only capture the network as seen in the London area.

In 1990, the Government decided to de-regulate commercial television and make it more competitive. Sensing a threat to our grant monies, and to archiving in general, the BFI argued the need to protect them on a statutory basis. The result was that the 1990 Broadcasting Act provides that the Independent Television Commission, which regulates all commercial television in Britain, should decide upon an annual sum to be paid to a National Television Archive by ITV and Channel 5 (which starts in March 1997) and at the same time the ITC made the same requirement from Channel 4. Our operations thus continued as before, but on a more secure basis. We will expand them to cover Channel 5 on the same basis when it begins next year.

The other significant legislation is the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988, which allows us to record and copy programmes without breach of copyright.

Although we do not have a comparable arrangement with the BBC for preservation recording, we have recorded the output of the BBC's two television channels onto S-VHS cassettes only, for public access purposes, since 1990. The BBC provides the cost of making these recordings (currently about £50,000 per

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annum) under a voluntary arrangement. The BBC also donates a lot of surplus material to us, especially 2" tapes which it has transferred, and its new Charter, agreed with Government this year, includes provisions obliging it to co-operate with us on archival issues.

We currently have no archival obligations for, or formal co-operation with, satellite or cable channels, but we are working on it.

I hope this is the sort of information you require. Please let me know if there is anything else or any extra detail you need.

Best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Bryant
Keeper of Television

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