

The Current State of American Television and Video Preservation

**Public Hearing
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**Statement of
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Thank you very much, Dr. Billington and other panel members, for the opportunity to participate in this hearing. My name is Thomas Connors and I am Curator of the National Public Broadcasting Archives, a unit of the University of Maryland at College Park Libraries.

The National Public Broadcasting Archives serves as the archival depository for the major entities of American public broadcasting. These entities include the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Public Broadcasting Service, National Public Radio, Children's Television Workshop, the Association of America's Public Television Stations and other organizations involved in non-commercial radio and television programming and program support. The National Public Broadcasting Archives also collects the papers of individuals who have made significant contributions to public and educational broadcasting in the United States.

The Archives was founded in June 1990. It was initiated by Dr. Donald R. McNeil, an educator and former lay member of the PBS board of directors. Don McNeil brought together the heads of several public broadcasting organizations and representatives of the UMCP Libraries and negotiated an agreement for archival services.

Don McNeil passed away on February 8 after a long and slow decline in health. It is interesting that earlier in his career Don had been assistant then acting director of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin--so he ended his career as he started it--with an archival mission. Even in his last days he remained aware of the progress of NPBA and was always available to advise and impart pieces of the managerial and fund-raising wisdom he had acquired over the years.

The early mission of NPBA focused mainly on the textual record of American public broadcasting. It was felt that the collecting

activities of the Library of Congress and the National Archives in the area of public broadcasting media was addressing the issues of preservation of and access to film and tape.

When I joined NPBA in early 1993 however it was becoming clear that there were audiovisual materials that were falling through the cracks, that were not being collected by LC or the National Archives. We decided that NPBA should become involved in certain aspects of the collection and preservation of moving image and audio materials as well as textual records.

I will concentrate the rest of my remarks on the issues of moving image preservation and access as they show up in the work of the National Public Broadcasting Archives.

We currently hold some 800 2" videotapes from WETA, some 2000 3/4" videocassettes from PBS, and some 100 1" videotapes from MPT, about 500 3/4 or 1/2 " cassettes also from MPT, 500 kinescopes and several hundred 2" videotapes from AIT.

Program titles include surviving copies of Hodge Podge Lodge, Live from the Birchmere, Live from Wolftrap, Town Meeting, several shows produced by NPACT. There are also tapes of 1970s vintage PBS coverage of professional tennis, shows like PBS Late Night and Over Easy, plus in-house closed circuit video communications between PBS and member stations.

We expect to be receiving more videotapes from WETA, MPT and PBS in the coming months.

The main local problem we face is environmental, that is, proper storage space and temperature/humidity levels. This is an ongoing problem that I am happy to say will see some resolution soon.

However, more crucial than the problems associated with physical storage and maintenance of videotape is the larger problem of reformatting for preservation and for access. The 2" videotape reels that many program masters are recorded on range in age from 25 to 35 years. These seem to be in fair condition physically but we know that they have exceeded their natural lifespan and will require some of kind of reformatting. Costwise, it is impossible to transfer all the programs we hold to a more stable videotape format. It is therefore necessary to devise a selection process so that the best of our public television program holdings are sure to be preserved.

I am speaking here of a three-tiered scheme that clearly delineates (1) those programs that are the best and most representative examples of the 50 years of educational and public television in the US, (2) those that are good and worthy programs to be reformatted for preservation as finances allow and (3)

those programs that will be allowed to live out their lives in the medium of their provenance.

I had the opportunity recently to pursue development of this scheme and I will now speak about my progress in that regard.

Last year I applied for and was awarded a Bentley Library Fellowship to study the issue of archival appraisal of public television programming. The Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan co-sponsors with NEH and the Mellon Foundation fellowships to archivists to reside in Ann Arbor in the summer for the purpose of studying some problem or issue in archival theory or administration.

My partner in the fellowship was Mary Ide, archivist of WGBH in Boston. In the course of our work at the Bentley we derived a set of guidelines that we think begins to address the problem of selection. Our underlying argument is that those who have dared to propose selection guidelines for television and video have been either strongly oriented to the physical medium or they have been all-inclusive in their content categories. We were looking for a more stringent set of appraisal considerations to guide us in making decisions regarding reformatting for preservation.

The considerations we derived include (1) program origin or provenance, (2) cost of retention, (3) implications of the selection decision, (4) reference potential, and (5) certain critical value considerations.

What we need to do next is to test out our guidelines to see how they work in day-to-day archival practice. This would involve hiring a moving image archives specialist to run the film and tape in our custody and to create a database of information on each program based on our selection guidelines.

We have been pursuing this from an archives profession point of view of course, but we think it necessary to include the industry itself in our discussion. And this goes for the larger discussion of preserving television programming in general--the industry must be made to understand its own responsibility in the work of preserving its own program legacy.

Collateral to the project I have just described is another effort I would like to mention briefly. This is the Public Broadcasting Program Index Project whose aim is to produce a complete online catalog/index of public and educational radio and television programs. Contained in each program record would be information on where a master tape of the program exists and who owns the rights to that program. The Program Index Project is a consortium effort among several organizations initiated by SOUNDPRINT Media Center Inc.

I have spoken about what is happening in my small corner of the moving image archives scene and I look forward to hearing what others have to say. There are many issues to be addressed and I have spoken only of those issues that affect me most directly. I would recommend that some kind of continuations apparatus be established as a result of these hearings so that those of us who are speaking here today--representatives from academia, from the television industry and from the preservation professions--can begin to speak to one another more systematically than we have in the past. Perhaps a follow-up conference would be useful. I would be most happy to lend my energies to organizing and realizing such a conference.

Thank you again for asking me to speak today.