

Public Broadcasting Service

Statement to the Library of Congress on Archival Preservation

March 26, 1996

Glenn Clatworthy

Associate Director

PBS Program Data & Analysis

Thank you for your invitation to PBS to make a statement on the issue of archival preservation. I'd like to begin today with a brief description of the Public Broadcasting Service.

PBS is a private, nonprofit corporation whose members are America's public television stations. Founded in 1969, PBS provides quality television programming and related services to 345 noncommercial stations serving all 50 states, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam and American Samoa.

PBS is a national distributor of public television programs. However, we do not produce the programs we distribute. Instead, PBS accepts programs offered for national distribution by a presenting entity, typically a public television station, which may be representing its own productions or productions acquired from American independent producers or other sources. PBS does not own the copyright to the programs it distributes; rather, we acquire the broadcast rights to a program for a limited number of airings over a limited period of time. When this period comes to an end, a program is said to have "expired."

Over its 26-year history, PBS has accumulated an archive of over 100,000 programs on commercial quality videotape and 16mm film. Our broadcast rights to the bulk of the programs in this collection—including most programs distributed by PBS and National Educational Television—have expired.

The PBS archival collection consists of two major subcollections, including PBS programs and series and the National Educational Television era. National Educational Television was the public television organization that preceded PBS, distributing programs by mail and/or national interconnection from the late 1950's until approximately 1970.

Acquired by PBS in the late 1970's, the NET collection consisted of over 9,000 videotapes and films. Slightly over half of the collection was on 16mm film; the remainder was on 2" videotape.

The PBS collection contains copies of virtually every PBS program broadcast since the network went on the air in 1970. It consists of over 100,000 reels in various formats, including 1", 2", D2 and D3 videotape. At least 7,000 reels from this set belong to our current collection, that is, programs to which PBS has current broadcast or distribution rights.

PBS' current technical operating specifications require that program presenters submit a broadcast-quality master and backup copy of every program accepted for broadcast on PBS. While our policy for archival retention has varied over time, PBS has retained at least a master copy of virtually every program we have distributed over the past twenty-six

years. PBS' current policy is to retain a digital D3 master and backup copy of every program, with the expectation that we will donate the master to the Library of Congress after expiration of rights.

Videotape and film masters for both the PBS and NET eras are maintained in a secure, climate-controlled facility in Springfield, Virginia.

Unfortunately, no single centralized inventory or descriptive database system is available for the entire archival collection. In fact, the NET and PBS collections are tracked using two separate computerized inventory systems. A third system, called the PBS Program Database, contains comprehensive information about PBS programs broadcast since 1987. Descriptive information for National Educational Television programs and PBS programs broadcast prior to 1987 is maintained in paper files, various computer files or on microfiche.

No descriptive electronic or paper materials are available for public research at PBS or via computer networks. PBS has chosen to support archival preservation and scholarly research through ongoing agreements with the Library of Congress and the National Public Broadcasting Archives at the University of Maryland. All requests for scholarly access to PBS materials are routed to those two institutions.

In 1990, PBS agreed to contribute papers and other historical materials to the new National Public Broadcasting Archives. To date, several hundred boxes of archival paper materials and 3/4" viewing cassettes have been transferred to the NPBA.

On September 15, 1993, PBS signed an agreement and instrument of gift whereby it would donate its collection of expired public television programs to the Library of Congress. In the first phase of our support for the agreement, PBS Program Data & Analysis evaluated the entire NET collection to determine the "best copy" of every distinct program. As a result, PBS offered almost 8,000 pieces of archival film and videotape to the Library of Congress. The LOC accepted our archival offering and transferred the materials to its own facility in September, 1994.

Currently, neither PBS nor the Library of Congress is in the position to exchange the full archive of expired PBS programs. Because of other recent demands, the PBS Tape Library has not had the resources to do a full inventory of the PBS collection. At the same time, the Library of Congress has expressed that it does not have storage space for the entire PBS collection, nor does it expect to in the near future.

As a result, Program Data & Analysis is evaluating the PBS collection for valuable, at-risk subcollections in the hope that the Library can expand its storage space gradually to accommodate more material. Our urgent focus is on 2" videotape. The 2" tapes stored in our warehouse are up to 35 years old; the integrity of these materials clearly is at risk. Moreover, since most public television stations and independent tape facilities no longer support 2" transfers, our ability to provide any form of access to materials on 2" tape also is at risk.

Our most recent project was to identify programs for which a single 2" copy exists. In July 1995, I made a supplementary offer of almost 8,000 2"

tapes to the Library of Congress. I'm please to say that we received notice on Friday, March 21, that the Library expects to be able to acquire this new subcollection within the next two months.

Now I would like to address some of the practical challenges to the mission of archival preservation. Television is a just-in-time medium. Distributors tend to focus on the television present and near-future and often don't have the interest or the resources to protect and document the television programs of the past. Many priceless local television productions, for example, have been lost to the dumpster or to the ether because the producing stations did not have the resources to maintain archives.

For the past twenty-six years, PBS has functioned as a safe harbor for producers of national public television programs by maintaining its extensive archival collection. Unfortunately, our own facility is only so wide and so deep. The good news is that our ongoing agreement with the Library of Congress provides us with a mechanism for preserving historical public television programs.

However, PBS must balance three important sets of needs. As a membership organization, PBS provides services to its member stations. We define services to include reasonable access by stations to the programs and series they provided to the system.

As a corporation, PBS has made a multimillion-dollar investment in programming. Although our distribution rights to a program may have

expired, we must be certain that we will have reasonable access to the broadcast master in case we contract to redistribute it in the foreseeable future.

Finally, we are aware of the public need, as evidenced by the continuing enthusiasm for public television and by the ongoing preservation efforts of such institutions as the Library of Congress.

Today I would like to make the following recommendations on the subject of archival preservation:

To fulfill its mandate to preserve a permanent record of the United States' television history, the Library of Congress must continue to pursue the resources to acquire, preserve and document historic television programs. In particular, we hope that the Library will be in a position to accept continuing donations from PBS, with special emphasis on the aging collection of 2" videotapes.

In the longer term, the Library and PBS—as well as the Library and other institutions—should form a combined strategy for evaluating, inventorying, transferring and preserving historic materials. This strategy may involve the Library offering assistance in reinventorying large collections. The Library also must be prepared to document and preserve acquired materials quickly, replacing deteriorating masters and adding descriptive catalog entries to the public record as soon as possible. Finally, the Library should be prepared to make viewing copies of archived tapes and films available for scholarly research in a timely manner.

Our MIS department at PBS has a descriptive phrase that I believe also applies to archival preservation: it's called "single point of failure." Any unique copy of an historical television program—whether it's on videotape, video disk or hard drive—is a single point of failure for a bit of history. The storage medium can either present a viewable image of a program or it can't, in which case a bit of history has been lost forever. Ultimately, the best model for long term archival preservation is ubiquity, the widespread distribution of television programs via both current and future media.

I believe that the ubiquity model for archival preservation dovetails nicely with the tremendous public and commercial interest in television history. The public is fascinated by older television programs. Meanwhile, television networks, distributors and production companies are hungry to acquire, process and deliver programming.

Therefore, it is in our best interest to find a common path that provides for archival preservation yet opens the doors to the ubiquitous distribution of historic programs. To this end, the Library should work with donating institutions to insure reasonable access to archived materials.

Further, we recommend that the Library be open to new initiatives and partnerships with both the public and private sectors to restore historic television programs and to make them widely available to the American people.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak at today's hearing.