

Statement for Library of Congress American Television and Video
Preservation Project

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In 1948, when the networks first offered full prime-time schedules, television was installed in American homes at a rate far exceeding any prior domestic technology in U.S. history. Television went from being a rich man's toy to a basic household fixture. It rapidly became the primary form of information and entertainment for most Americans. By 1960, almost 90% of the public had a television set and watched about five hours of television a day. Over the course of the next three decades television would continue to be the primary culture industry, not only domestically but also, with the rapid growth of foreign syndication, abroad. Today virtually all households include at least one receiver; cable penetration is at approximately 65% percent; and the average American watches about five to seven hours of television a day. These circumstances alone should convince anyone that television is a key force in the everyday life of our nation, serving as well as a key instrument for global trade and cultural exchange.

Over the past four decades, educators, artists, policy-makers, social psychologists, politicians, and numerous other groups have been acutely interested in the role television plays in defining our relationship to our selves, our children, our local communities, our national leaders, and the world around us. These interests clearly necessitate the preservation of our televisual past as a source for understanding a major component of the nation's history and life. As a media historian, I want to describe specifically the need for preservation for educators in the humanities.

Perhaps it seems odd for educators to be interested in the preservation of a medium that has been categorized as a "vast wasteland" or a "plug in drug" and blamed for the loss of family values, for violence, dangerous sexuality, as well as a host of other social evils. However, research in the humanities has been less biased about the medium, attempting to find more objective criteria by which to evaluate television and the reasons why so many people watch TV.

While aims vary, it is generally assumed that the study of television includes the study of programs themselves. That is to say, scholars place significant emphasis on the close analysis of television series and genres as a way to understand how these series have both shaped and been shaped by larger social, economic, cultural, and artistic trends. As an educator,

my goal in this pursuit is to demonstrate to my students and my readers that television is more than a toaster or electronic wallpaper. I am also concerned to show that its relevance in our social world can not be boiled down to simplistic and overly melodramatic assumptions which depict it as a modern day Pandora's box that can be blamed for evils such as violence or impoverished families, evils that are clearly wrought by men and not machines. Instead, television should be understood as a central tool for the communication of ideas, whether they be ideas about race and criminal justice--as in the case of Rodney King or Anita Hill--or whether they be more everyday "common sense" ideas about how to live in a family, ideas that are regularly represented on programs like Full House or Murphy Browne.

Moreover, television's power to communicate ideas and silence others necessitates that we better understand its rhetorical structures and aesthetics forms. In other words, the study of television programming allows us to teach young people to stop merely "watching" TV and start "reading" it analytically in order to become more critical about when it serves as a source of enlightenment and emotional uplift or, conversely, when its messages create incomplete, reductive, and biased ideas about the world. The historical analysis of why certain genres have been produced, why they dealt with certain themes rather than others, or why they represented women and minority groups in demeaning ways, sheds light on the whole fabric of social values and ethics in our nation's recent past. Looked at in this way, television programs are not merely trivial commercial forms that can be dismissed by historians and politicians as bad evidence or false/biased data. Instead, television programs shed light on our nation's belief systems and the changes in those belief systems over time. As we enter the 21st Century, media literacy is a survival tool in an electronic wilderness of endless, unprocessed data and confusing world events that are beamed from in from all corners of the globe. An understanding of how television programs have historically shaped ideas about the world, and how they continue do so, should be part of the "tool kit" of every person in this nation.

As numerous archivists will reveal in this study, the job of preserving television is quite complex. Much of the early live programming no longer exists, at least in one place. As a historian of this early period, I found myself on endless hunts through public and private collections, looking for materials that might comprise a sample beyond mere artifact. Because the "text" of television is itself expansive, the analysis of entire series rather than single episodes is often mandatory. And because the text itself includes not only the program, but also the commercials inserted in it,

historians are typically eager to get original off-air programs rather than looking at the edited syndicated versions. Although there are several prominent archival collections, any researcher knows that the present state of affairs makes serious scholarship difficult at best. While nostalgia networks like "Nick and Nite" rerun classic sitcoms for "campy" pleasure, America's "television heritage" (to use that network's phrase) is more than a few popular hits from the past with commercial value today. A serious historical understanding of television--its relationship to the American past, present, and future--will necessitate the careful collection of all kinds of programs, the hits and misses, the long-lasting series and the flops, the pleasurable and unpleasurable hours of text that have flickered across the living room screen.

In short, from the point of view of media history and its ramifications for media literacy today, the preservation of television is critical. As so many historians know, it is the everyday, incidental and seemingly trivial aspects of a civilization that often tell us most about it. Television tells us how people communicate with each other in a technological world where face to face communication has been replaced by electronic communities. Although television does not reflect our needs and desires in the same way that interpersonal communication does, it is a tool by which we relate to one another and make sense of our world. Certainly, our lives and times are in part recorded in these programs. And certainly, who and what these programs do not include--such as minority groups or minority views--also tells us much about who, at any given time, is allowed to represent the nation. The preservation of television programs will thus illuminate how various ideas and belief systems of our postwar culture helped to shape historical events; it will also show how other views and belief systems were silenced; and hopefully, it will allow us to analyze these silences and to produce television programs and distribution networks that can correct the mistakes of the past. Finally, preservation of television's past will be a step toward the important job of educating our children in media literacy as they embark on a future that will no doubt be even more saturated with electronic imagery than we can imagine.

--Prof. Lynn Spigel
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