

**Remarks of George Stevens, Jr.
The Current State of American Television
and Video Preservation
Library of Congress
A Public Hearing
March 26, 1996**

When I was a young man in Hollywood cutting my teeth in the film world, there were few opportunities to see the motion pictures of the past. The studios that produced the films felt that what had gone before was past and all attention was paid to producing hit pictures for the present. The result was that the movies made during the first fifty years of the film industry were ignored – a majority of them were allowed to deteriorate in vaults or were melted down to recover the silver content in the negatives.

When I had the opportunity to start the American Film Institute in 1967, we made motion picture preservation our first priority. Though there were many films that we would never be able to find and others that were too far deteriorated to preserve, we were successful in rallying a vanguard to the idea of rescuing and conserving our motion picture heritage and preserving films that otherwise would have been lost. Among the legacies of that beginning are the over twenty thousand feature motion pictures in the AFI Collection in the Library of Congress and, equally important, a national awareness that the art and history that exists on motion picture film are essential aspects of the country's intellectual treasure and cultural heritage.

It became apparent to me during our work on film preservation in the early seventies that there was another sphere of American creativity and communication that was beginning to be lost in the same way as the early motion pictures. Television – which had taken its place on the American stage and was to a large degree eclipsing movie going as a pastime – was plunging forward with hardly any concern for the fact that it was the historical record of our times. Television was becoming a unique and primary record of our times and what the historian Eric Barnouw likened to America's "central nervous system."

We set out in 1975 to try to bring together the networks, producers and other institutions in a collaborative effort to focus on the preservation of our television heritage. While that initiative called attention to the problem, there was little interest from government agencies, foundations and the industry, so today we face a problem that has grown through the years.

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When Bill Murphy invited me to testify at these hearings he told me he had uncovered an article I had written for the *Washington Post* in 1975 based on a speech I had given to the Popular Culture Association. Fortunately the article was published on paper. I am certain if it had been recorded on video it would have been lost in the intervening twenty-one years.

Mr. Murphy sent me the article in which I went on at far greater length than I intend to today (three cheers for good judgement that comes with age) describing the horror stories of lost programs and the peril that continued inattention to saving and preserving television broadcasts would bring. The article noted that by 1975 NBC had retained and cataloged 17,779 hours of programming which was about 7% of its total programming. 107,835 hours of programming were listed as "not retained." From that day to this – a span of 21 years – the networks and stations have each day been producing programs and one suspects not doing much better in preserving them, particularly since the last decade has been a period of "downsizing," that caused considerable reduction of staff and infrastructure at the major networks.

During the years when the AFI, Library of Congress, George Eastman House, and the Museum of Modern Art served as a consortium working to preserve our motion picture heritage, it is not an exaggeration to say we were viewed, at best, as a nuisance and, at worst, with hostility by the studios whose films we were working to preserve.

That situation is much improved today. Most of the studios have created special vaults for storing their films and are instituting preservation standards and procedures. Unfortunately this awakening to the value and importance of the films they own came too late to save some of the finest motion pictures ever made.

I believe it is important to understand how this change in attitude at the major studios came about. The job description of the individuals now in charge of preservation is revealing. They are not given the traditional title of "archivist." They are designated vice presidents in charge of "asset management." The change in attitude came only when studio owners realized that these old films that the public archives had been working to preserve for several decades had, with the arrival of home video, become "assets."

I make this point because I believe television preservation is going to present a new set of problems. So much of the television material that must be saved is news and recorded history – and I do not believe that the nightly news or the coverage of the Vietnam War or the advances in American science will ever have "asset" value comparable to *Casablanca* or *Singin' in the Rain*.

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The volume of existing material which needs to be preserved is staggering, the cost of preserving it will be great, and each day and each year new material of value is being created.

So it seems to me that the admirable effort that Dr. Billington and The Library of Congress have undertaken will require special gifts of persuasion and organization. There can be no question that it is in the national interest for the view of our times as seen on television to be preserved.

When thinking about conserving that which is timeless, it seems sensible to look to the wisdom of the ancients. It was Cicero who said, "History is the witness of the times, the torch of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life, the messenger of antiquity."

Witness, memory, teacher and messenger – television is all these things.

Failure to preserve it will deny future generations of Americans a vital legacy.

Preserving it will be a formidable task and it will require leadership at the national level. I salute the Library for its leadership and urge all institutions to collaborate in this significant task.