

Library of Congress
Study of the Current State of American Television and Video Preservation
Public Hearing
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Remarks of David B. Liroff, Vice President and Chief Technology Officer, WGBH
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I am David Liroff, Vice President and Chief Technology Officer at the WGBH Educational Foundation in Boston.

WGBH is perhaps best known as a major producer of programs seen on public television stations nationwide - for "Masterpiece Theater", "NOVA", "Frontline", "The American Experience", how-to programs such as "The French Chef" with Julia Child and "This Old House", and programs for children such as "Zoom" and "Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego", to name but a few. We also produce numerous educational and instructional programs for teachers and students using both traditional video, computer-based multimedia, print and computer on-line services, and were one of the early practitioners of "multi-versioning", in which editorial materials created for one medium - for example broadcast television - is re-versioned into interactive videodiscs or CD-ROM. We pioneered TV captioning for hearing-impaired audiences in 1972, and continued our commitment to assuring media access with the introduction in 1990 of the Descriptive Video Service, which provides supplementary narration for blind and visually impaired viewers.

WGBH supports your objective to help ensure that the efforts of all of us who are concerned about television and video preservation are effective and

complementary; to generate public awareness of the value and vulnerability of these materials; and to increase accessibility for educational purposes.

Mary Ide, the Director of the WGBH Media Archives and Preservation Center, has responded to the "television and video preservation survey" which is a part of the current study, so there is no need here to recap the chapter and verse of our current archival program. Likewise, I am confident that others who have far greater knowledge and experience than I in the information sciences will be speaking to issues such as appraisal criteria, preservation standards, access policies, copyright issues, and the like.

I would like to focus my brief remarks here today on the opportunity presented by the new digital electronic media technologies to develop a comprehensive, integrated, and holistic approach not only to the preservation of television and video materials, but also to the collection, cataloging, preservation and retrieval of the records associated with these materials. I raise this issue not to overwhelm us, but to identify an opportunity which otherwise might pass us by.

Understandably, much of the focus in your current exploration of these issues is on the television and video materials themselves.

But I strongly recommend that one outcome of this study should be a series of recommendations designed to facilitate access not only to television and video materials, but to related production files; contracts and releases; field production notes and directors' and editors' notes; production stills; captioning and descriptive video data; promotion and publicity materials; and derivatives such

as multi-media products and computer on-line-service content generated from or based on the original materials.

As David Fanning, executive producer of the documentary series "Frontline" has observed, thanks to the Internet and the World Wide Web, the completed broadcast program has become the "executive summary" of materials gathered to produce the program. Through experience with the "Frontline" home page on the World Wide Web, we are beginning to understand the potential for making some of the materials which weren't included in the final broadcast program readily accessible on-line to those who want access to greater detail about a story, or to related information, or to longer versions of interviews which had to be cut short to meet the dictates of standard broadcast program lengths.

For purposes of historic preservation, facilitating access to these related materials - and to the production records I listed a moment ago - should be encompassed in any set of recommendations about how we go forward from here.

The idea of being able to engage in this sort of "one stop shopping" may sound like a pipe-dream. Admittedly the list of related records may be too all-encompassing to ever be fully captured. But with increasing frequency, these production-related materials are being created and stored as electronic records. The development of ever-more sophisticated relational databases, the World Wide Web concept of "hot links" to connect separate but related databases, and the rapidly decreasing cost of computer processing power and digital storage capacity all suggest that a forward-looking television and video preservation program should consider recommendations making it more certain that in the

future a more complete record of each television and video program element will be preserved and will be retrievable.

There is little doubt that the cost of applying such recommendations retroactively and remedially would be too overwhelming to contemplate in most cases. However, looking forward, while it is clear that the application of a comprehensive strategy would necessarily require the development of new compliance disciplines, it is likely that the cost of implementing these disciplines would not be exponentially greater than current practice, which focuses principally on the television and video materials themselves.

There are at present in the market a few computer systems which address some of these issues , but from our exploration we conclude that there are none that do the whole job - from content searches of the media materials themselves, to links with related records, to providing direct access to digitized versions of the materials. The technology to develop cataloging, storage, and retrieval systems sufficiently comprehensive to achieve these objectives either exists now or will soon exist, but the technology is not now being applied to realize its fullest potential. (For example, those with expertise in the field can project when the cost of disk-based storage will become competitive with tape-based media for specific applications.)

And while individual organizations and institutions will develop their own standards and protocols, any recommendations of "best practices" by the Library of Congress which will ensure that these efforts are effective and complementary would be extremely valuable, reducing the probability of inefficient duplication of effort and the creation of incompatible standards. At the

very least, it would be extraordinarily helpful to implement a documentation strategy which facilitates a shared understanding of what is being done, and who is collecting what, how, and why.

It may be that for current and future production, a production organization's archives becomes the first stop for materials coming in from the field, and for related records. Under such an approach, once these materials have been acquired, they would never physically leave the archives, but would be converted to digital form (if they aren't already digital) and would be accessible to users through digital servers. Once in the archives' possession, the materials would be linked with related records, so that the creation of a permanent comprehensive file can progress as the work progresses.

At this juncture, going forward, we have the opportunity to recognize that new digital electronic media technologies will both change the definition of what constitutes television and video material, and will facilitate a comprehensive approach not only to the preservation of television and video materials, but also to the collection, cataloging, preservation and retrieval of the records associated with these materials which should be a part of the permanent record preserved for research and study.