

## **Clearing the Distortion: TV History and Local Archives**

Caroline Frick, *University of Texas at Austin*

Recent scholarly interest in so-called “local television” history raises important issues related to the value, impact, and longstanding cost of making such materials widely accessible, much less preserved in any traditional sense. Underlying the preliminary organizing question for this panel are a number of key definitional and conceptual concerns that extend past academic theory into the very practical realm of preservation policy.

**The “local:”** As numerous television scholars have noted, capturing the rather loosely defined concept of what constitutes local television remains elusive. The FCC has supported and, indeed, mandated that local stations must serve community interests; but what community is solely local? A close look at Texas radio and television history offers a compelling example that local stations were never just “local” in any sense. In particular, the two statewide regional radio “hookups,” the Texas Quality Network and the Texas State Network offered a wide array of programming across Texas and into adjoining states. Moreover, the amazingly hilarious history of Texas-Mexico “border radio” offers fascinating case studies of the state’s international border and the lack of enforceable regulation in the region.

**The academic field:** As the previous paragraph suggests, so-called local radio history and television history are necessarily tied together. The vast majority of local television stations in Texas, and in the majority of other locations across the United States, succeeded in television due to their efforts in radio. Unfortunately, radio history has largely emerged in a separate area of study and involving different cohorts of scholars much like television scholarship has with film studies. More challenging for academic interest in local television is the blunt fact that the majority of film and video artifacts that remain (or, equally importantly, have been funded for access and preservation) represent decades-long work by local news teams, not entertainment. Is local news going to be of interest to traditional film and television students and professors? Data garnered from the last ten years of digitization programs focused on local television archives and university libraries supports the theory that most television historians remain most interested in entertainment, not news.

**Preservation:** Large scale local television projects have forced archives to rethink traditional approaches to preservation practice. Students in boutique film archiving training programs learn that “true” preservation is “film preservation” (i.e., celluloid is preserved only on celluloid.) This approach, however, was largely driven and dictated by large national repositories that contained feature entertainment, rather than smaller, regional institutions containing thousands upon thousands of outtakes and with far fewer resources. University libraries, independent state, region and/or city archives have led the challenge to digitize and put online local television collections; in 2016, the Library of Congress offers less audiovisual content online than do small archives with largely “local” material. And yet, “local” is still seen as mysteriously elusive.

In addition, the largest challenge to future television scholarship, local or otherwise, will be format specific: obsolete video content. While small moving image archives can digitize film in-house quite easily, video formats utilized in national and local production from the 1970s on must be transferred at a small number of very expensive post-production facilities. Time is running out for these formats with very real impact for future scholarship. Contemporary television history bemoans the loss of early, live television, but in forty years, such loss will be minor in comparison to the decades of television lost via technological obsolescence.

Collaboration: The traditional lack of scholarly interest in local television history has impacted quite seriously how particular projects obtain preservation funding or, in most case, do not. The National Endowment for the Humanities, as only one example, has virtually no funding on the state level. Proposed projects on the federal level, however, remain mired in a mid-twentieth century mindset in which faculty, many of whom have little to no technical knowledge much less interest in “local” or non-canonical topics, maintain significant influence. For example, a university in Texas applied for NEH funding for a local television project and received feedback from the scholars who reviewed the proposal that the region’s television product would be of value only to itself – not to the nation.

Federal agencies, as well as state and city organizations or endowments, promote the value of collaboration to obtaining preservation funding. Collaboration, in practice, however proves...challenging for a number of key reasons: technical, institutional, and, of course, personal. The Texas Archive of the Moving Image has been collaborating with a wide range of organizations across the state to digitize and preserve film and television content for over a decade. Collaboration will be of increasing value and importance to archives, libraries and scholars interested in local or sub-national television. Although a national-local collaborative model appears most logical, I fear it the least feasible. Instead, statewide collaboration or even simply county-driven collaboration, might prove more possible and of greater impact and value. Sharing the goals of scholars to “incorporate marginal television programs and artifacts” into the canon through ground-up research, archives and libraries likely need to, themselves, collaborate from the ground-up rather than rely on national funding.

“Local” television projects within the United States might indeed help to clear scholarly distortion, or might they be further blurring, distorting, and simply making more messy (and more fun?) broadcasting histories?