

Local TV Archives and TV Historiography

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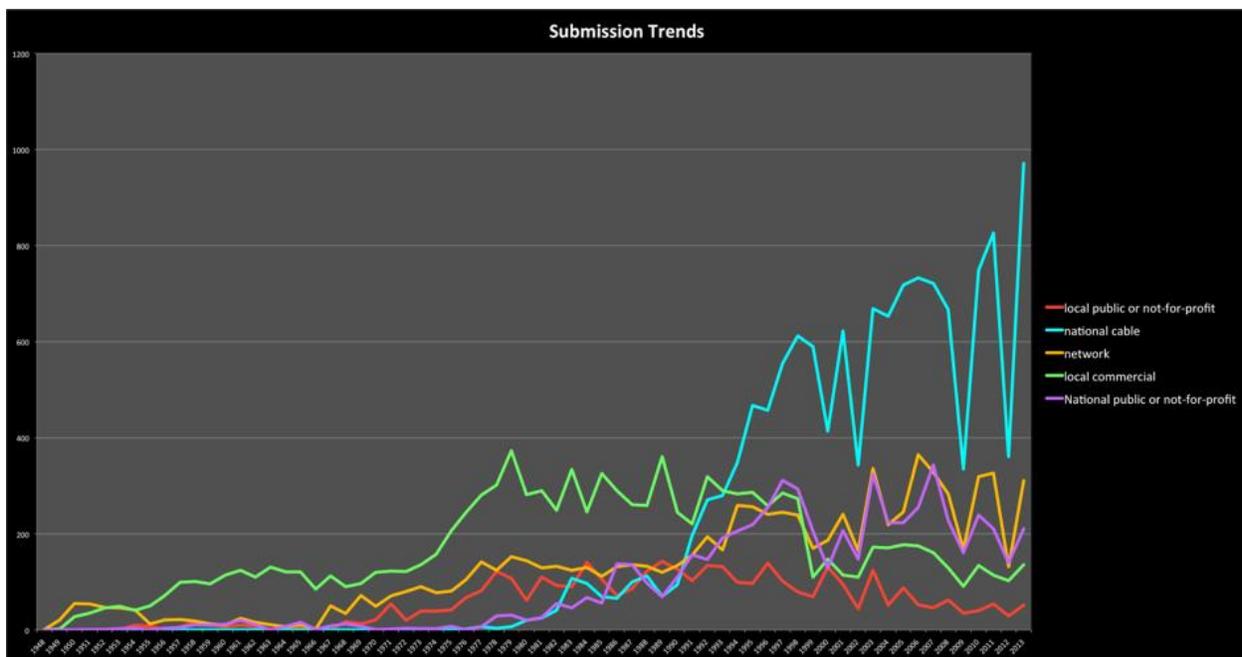
During 2015, I spent a semester in residence in Athens, Georgia, working with the Peabody Awards archive, which houses most of the television programs submitted for consideration dating back to 1948. Aside from teaching one course on TV history, my responsibilities were to 1) organize a symposium that would kick-start research projects for sixteen other scholars working with the archive, and 2) conduct my own research in the archive. This added up to a pretty simply mandate: I spent as much time as possible with the archive, watching hundreds of hours of programming, and wrapping my head as best I could around what was there and what might be done with it. In this response I want to draw upon that experience to address two of the questions in the prompt: what we might learn from paying more attention to local TV, and how we might encourage more historiography based on work with TV archives.

Because the Peabody Archive houses submissions from individual stations and producers from all over the country, the archive serves as a national archive of local television programming. The biggest takeaway for me from my time at Peabody was recognizing the boom in submissions from local stations during the 1960s and 1970s, which falls off in the 1980s. Not coincidentally, that period ranges between Newton Minow's "wasteland" and Mark Fowler's "toaster"—years when stations were expected to show they operated in the public interest and that TV should do more than just entertain. (See graph below.) Local productions were encouraged by the FCC's requirements for operating in the public interest, but were also shaped according to notions of what constituted appropriate "quality" programming for local audiences as opposed to programming for a nationwide, network audience.

A closer look at the actual programs themselves shows stations produced news and documentary specials that were not only targeting local audiences and local concerns, but that also pushed the boundaries of popular discourse on social issues. Attention to these programs may force us to revise conceptions about how television mediated social issues during the height of the network era. In my own research projects based on the archive, for example, I am looking at how some southern stations produced programming that articulated regional identity during the civil rights era. For example, in 1960, WIS in Columbia, South Carolina produced *Without End to Dare*, an elaborate reenactment of the state's secession convention 100 years earlier, starring Senator Strom Thurmond. The period of the local TV boom also coincides with the Vietnam War, and there are many documentaries that examine the regional effects of the war and its aftermath, including the reintegration of veterans and influx of refugees in the mid-1970s. These programs show local television covered the Vietnam War in a way that spoke directly to local concerns, sometimes in overt dialogue with how the war was discussed elsewhere in the nation and on network television. A personal example of how attention to local television has refigured my own understanding of television history is in regards to the history of news parody. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were a number of apocalyptic "fake news" specials

produced by local stations. A couple dealt with environmental disaster, and a couple more with nuclear war. My personal favorite, though, was produced in Miami in 1976, and featured the regular local news team in full colonial costume reporting on local events at the beginning of the American Revolution as if they were just happening. Attention to these precursors to the current news parody boom indicates not just the flexibility of the format, but that audiences have been conditioned to take “fake news” seriously for some time.

In terms of encouraging more work with such “marginal” TV from archives, I am interested in collaborating on something like an NEH-sponsored summer institute on TV historiography. This would be based at an institution (like University of Georgia/Peabody or UT/TAMI) where faculty and graduate students—both in media studies and especially in related fields in the humanities—could learn about working with media archives and methods of media historiography, as well as have opportunities to get to know the archive and begin their own research. The fact that so many of the local programs are documentaries means that it is imperative to reach beyond the narrow confines of “TV Studies”. Indeed, scholars outside the discipline of media studies no doubt have research questions to pursue in local TV archives that media scholars might not know (or be interested) to ask. But our expertise with working with such materials, not to mention knowledge and understanding of media history, means we may help them in developing and pursuing those questions in addition to our own.



This graph (courtesy Lucas Hatlen) provides a quick view of where Peabody submissions came from between 1948 and 2014. Note especially the light green “local commercial” line which booms during the 1970s.