

# What Would a Television Preservation Task Force Look Like?

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Earlier efforts to study television preservation struggled with two main concerns: how to articulate television's value and the infrastructural obstacles. We are past whether we *should* preserve television but we share questions about procedure and feasibility. It is hard to tell if this is a comfort that our questions are not new or a sign of futility that the obstacles are insurmountable, but nevertheless, the past studies are instructive.

To preserve television has been and continues to be a question of how we preserve television's *products*. As products, television remained within commercial, legal frameworks (even public broadcasts) that tied value found in content to the contractual limitations of reuse. Additionally, the focus on products required dealing with its physicality, such as securing and maintaining the product. And then there was the question of who would store and provide access to these products; one national center, a consortium, or an informal decentralized network?

My observations draw mostly from the "Ad Hoc Committee on Television Preservation," a mid-1970s, which occurred alongside revisions to copyright law and represents the confluence of recording technologies, issues of proprietary control, and academic uses that treated programs as legitimate sources. Putting matters of taste as a driver for selection aside, technological and legal logistics (e.g. contracts with networks, producers, unions, etc.) placed the greatest burdens on implementing the infrastructures for preservation. The political economic battlefield raised the stakes in defining certain kinds of programs as indisputable for preservation, as evidenced by the following statement from the Vanderbilt TV News Archive: "I would hate to see the usefulness of this – and similar – collections impaired by lumping everything shown on television under 'television.'"<sup>1</sup> This point paired news' obvious research value with its lack of "reshow value," thus a reason why the new copyright act and the proposed national television archive instrumentally had to separate television. The head of the UCLA TV Archive protested that if the LoC would become *the* national archive, bolstered by its copyright deposits, then other archives suffer because of the cost of duplication and the murky legalities of preservation outside the LoC.<sup>2</sup> Each subcommittee – selection, acquisition, and technology – had to weigh commercial logics. This is not to speak against the necessity for partnerships between industry and public institutions but rather to highlight the central tensions in the preservation of television as public good and historical records.

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<sup>1</sup> James P. Pilkington to Stuart Sucherman. Sept. 16, 1975. Ford Foundation Grant Files, 749-827, Section 5D, Rockefeller Archives Center, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Schwartz to Stuart Sucherman. Feb. 18, 1976. Ford Foundation Grant Files, 749-827, Section 5D, Rockefeller Archives Center, New York.

What links each study together and bring us to today relates to precarity: strategic contours of what we call 'television,' technologies that play, store, and record programs, relationships among stakeholders, time and labor to acquire, care for, and make available programs, and who holds the title of 'television archive.' There are more concrete lessons from these studies, but I'll conclude with three suggestions that extrapolate from the network era to the digital post-network convergence era.

One, as more institutions became interested in archiving television, the more they focused on preserving television's *products* and the harder it became to collect evidence of *processes*, or the paper-based material, which were also impacted by legal constraints. A taskforce must develop relationships and pathways to ensure we continue building a paper trail. Our challenges to preserve processes include the usual obstacles to solicit donations, but how do we convey the historical value of a person or entity's records mired by proprietary logics? Or how do we treat more informal records of processes such as social media interactions?

Two, for all the visions in outlining a nation-wide archive (even codified in copyright law, sec. 113), no definitive plan ever took shape. We do not need to pursue one but we may revisit past ideas about decentralized networks, especially since some of the technological barriers have lifted.

Relatedly, three, past studies demonstrate that materials exist in archives, but are scattered. Thus, we must address the problem of accessibility. How can we develop an interface that effectively collates the existing wealth of television-related materials, particularly in places outside of prevalent archives? By linking collections and enhancing the likelihood of finding existing collections, we may identify the gaps and prioritize the collection of television products and processes that have been outside of formal archives and studies. An interface can also connect what we may think of precarious archives – the slippery and unsteady archives found on the web or our own diy collections that operate outside of the contractual and economic limitations of formal archives. We may consider how to engage our students in the tasks of locating and linking a network of collections that begin with nodes of inquiry such as a particular program or person and see how far we can go in identifying existing archival material and leads to pull in the informal material. Like the RPTF, we can leverage our expertise and networks.