

# Here Today, Forgotten Tomorrow: Preserving Television & New Media

*Nedda H. Ahmed, Georgia State University*

Cave paintings disappear from erosion, books crumble or get eaten by bugs, and films decompose into dust. Preservation seeks to save what can be saved, but our records of the past cannot ever be absolutely complete. Television and new media are among the newest entries into the field of human expression, but the inherent seriality and ephemerality of these media result in a set of troubling long-term access and preservation challenges.

We know that only small portion of television programming makes it onto commercially-available DVDs in the first place. At the 2014 FLOW Conference, we heard studio executives discuss the considerable amount of work that went into creating a collectors' edition DVD box set of Star Trek. The discussion made it clear that this type of work is attempted only if the studios believe they can make a profit off releasing their content. Soap operas, sporting events, "niche" shows, locally-produced programs and more are unlikely ever to be released on DVD, since the potential market is small. By denying access to view previously broadcast material, content producers are effectively erasing objects from the view of present and future scholars.

Is the outlook brighter for content that *does* make it onto DVD? The Library of Congress is still evaluating the technology's long-term stability, although DVDs are currently regarded as the most permanent, shareable, and convenient method of long-term access for libraries and scholars. Will DVDs endure? Or will the technology prove to be unstable over time, leading to a mass extinction that would further shrink the pool of objects available to study? What are the alternatives?

An even more challenging picture of the future comes into focus when we shift our attention to born-digital content such as email, websites, web series, social media, and original content from streaming platforms. It is ridiculous to think that Internet providers and media companies will provide access to everything in perpetuity, but how much can be saved? What *should* be saved? Who decides?

Research universities setting up regional content archives could be one potential, albeit imperfect, solution. In this scenario, a university would collect and provide access to the film and television productions created in its geographic area. Georgia State, for example, is situated in Atlanta, Georgia, which boasts some of the highest US-based film and television production activity outside of Los Angeles, California. Georgia is also

part of the Southeastern US, an area which has a long history of media production, such the silent film industry's work in Florida and tax-incentive driven filmmaking in Louisiana--and beyond. I am testing this "regional content archives" concept with my project, Screening the South.

In Screening the South's initial phase, we are creating an open dataset containing all the film and television productions based in and/or representing the Southeastern United States. The production titles gleaned so far come from the copious amounts of scholarly literature on this subject. After 5 years of off-again/on-again work, we have logged over 1000 films and 50 television shows, with several dozen more sources left to consult. The second phase of Screening the South will be to collect as many of the films and shows as possible in order to create a working archives. We have already found many productions that are lost or inaccessible in any format, but by capturing the metadata on these lost productions in the dataset, we keep them alive, if by name only.

This project will never reach completion, of course, so decisions must be made about where "boundaries" will go: will we stop at a certain date? Will we only collect material produced in Atlanta, as opposed to the entire region? Etc. etc. The entire concept is inherently flawed. However, by establishing collection responsibility for local media production, Screening the South creates a model that can be followed by other institutions in other regions, ultimately creating a network of archives dedicated to collecting, preserving, and providing access to material that would otherwise be forgotten.